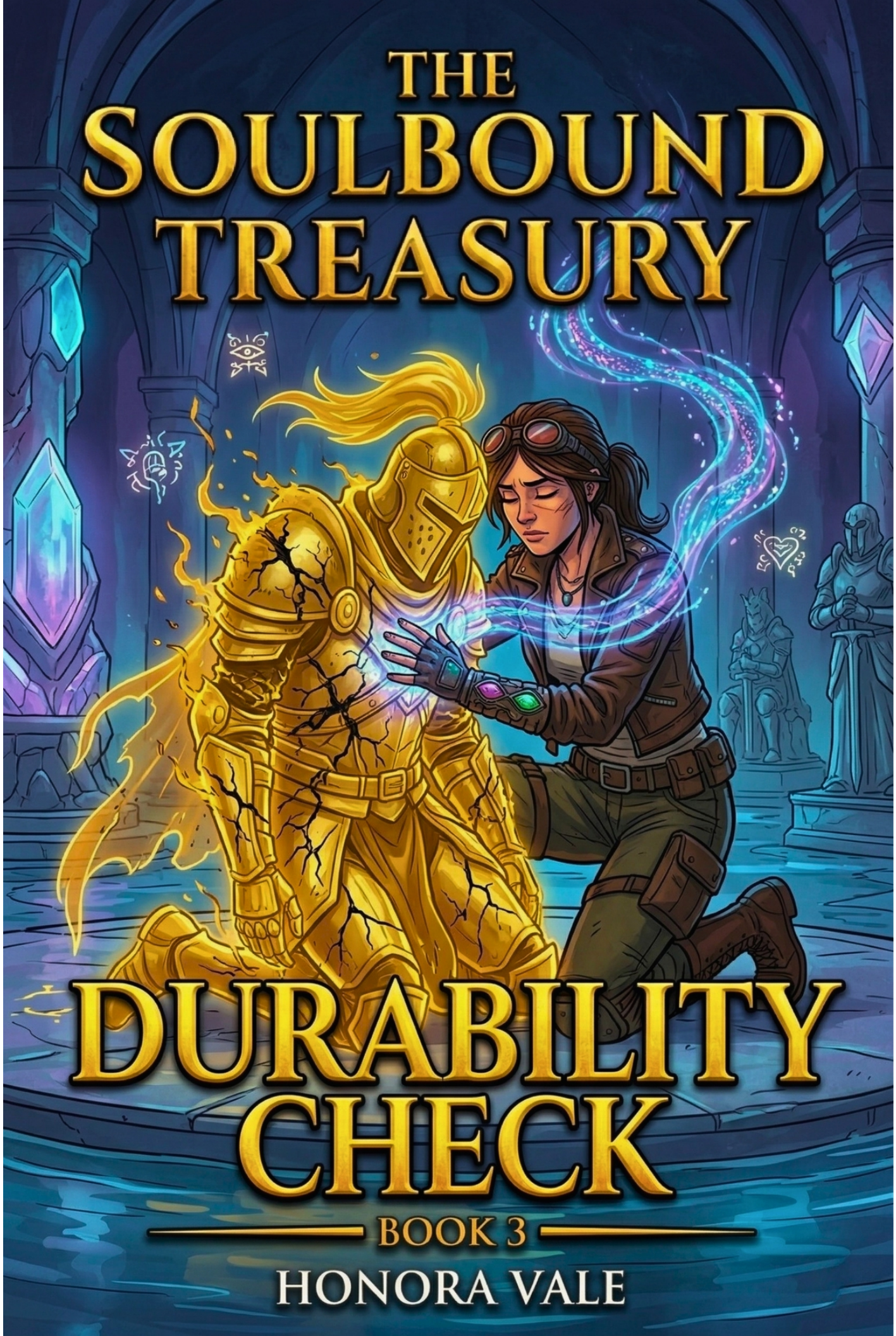
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BOOK 3
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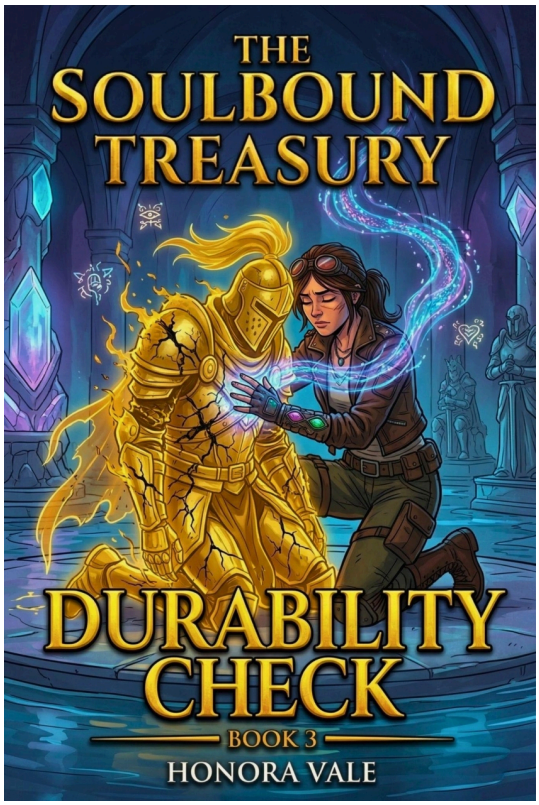

The Soulbound Treasury: Durability Check

Book 3

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Chapter 1

The first thing Sadie noticed was the silence.

It wasn't the quiet of a library or the stillness of a sleeping house. It was a heavy, suffocating absence. For the last year of her life, the world had hummed. The System had a sound—a low, electric thrum that lived at the base of her skull, a constant reminder of notifications, cooldowns, and the flow of mana. It was the white noise of godhood.

Now, there was nothing. Just the high-pitched ringing in her own ears and the wet, ragged sound of her own breathing.

Sadie opened her eyes.

The world was sideways.

She was lying on a floor that was tilted at a forty-five-degree angle. Dust motes danced in a shaft of harsh, unfiltered sunlight slicing through a tear in the hull. Above her—or what used to be above her—twisted cables dangled like the guts of a slaughtered animal, sparking weakly.

"System," she croaked. Her voice sounded small. Broken. "Status report."

She waited for the blue box. She waited for the comforting **[System Alert]** or the familiar **[Health Critical]** flash in her peripheral vision.

Nothing happened.

The air smelled of copper and burnt plastic.

Sadie tried to sit up. A sharp, hot line of agony shot up her left side. She gasped, clutching her ribs. Her hand came away wet and red.

She stared at the blood on her palm. It looked... real. It wasn't the bright, digital crimson of a hit marker. It was dark, sticky, and oxidizing rapidly in the dry air.

"Inventory," she whispered, tapping the air in front of her face.

Her finger poked empty space.

"Inventory," she said louder, panic rising in her throat like bile. She swiped her hand frantically, trying to grab the invisible handle of her storage dimension. "Potion. Greater Healing. Come on."

She grabbed nothing but dust.

The panic hit her then, cold and absolute. She scrambled backward, her boots slipping on the tilted metal floor. She was blind. She was deaf. The overlay that had defined her existence—the numbers that told her she was strong, the inventory that held her wealth—was gone.

She wasn't **The Treasurer** anymore. She wasn't **Level 100**. She wasn't even **Level 1**.

She was just Sadie. And Sadie was hurt.

She checked her pockets. Her physical pockets.

Lint. A piece of dried wyvern jerky. A small coil of copper wire.

[Current Gold: 0]

The notification didn't appear, but the number burned in her mind anyway. A phantom memory of wealth.

"Jax?" she called out. "Gubbins?"

Her voice died in the vast, broken cathedral of the bridge.

She tried to stand. Her legs wobbled. Without the **[Dexterity]** buff, her balance felt wrong. She felt heavy, anchored to the floor by a gravity that seemed twice as strong as it used to be.

She stumbled over a piece of white polymer plating. She looked down at her left arm.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Her wrist was bare.

The **Soulbound Treasury**—the iron band that housed the Trinity, the source of her power, the thing she had worn since the day she crawled out of the scrap heap—was gone.

"No," she whispered. She fell to her knees, ignoring the pain in her ribs. She began to dig through the debris. "No, no, no."

She tossed aside chunks of dashboard and shattered glass. She scraped her knuckles raw on jagged metal.

"Where are you?" she sobbed. "Don't be gone. Please don't be gone."

Her hand brushed against something cold.

It was buried under a pile of grey ash near the captain's chair.

Sadie pulled it out.

It didn't look like an artifact of legendary power. It looked like junk.

It was a heavy, thick band of rough-forged iron. The metal was pitted and scarred. It was covered in rust that flaked off on her skin.

And the gems...

Sadie wiped the ash away with her thumb.

The Amber gem—Valerius—was dull, looking like a piece of dirty sea glass. The Obsidian gem—Kaelen—was matte black, swallowing the light, cold to the touch.

And the Ruby gem.

Sadie's heart stopped.

The red stone, the house of Thorne, the berserker who had saved her life a dozen times, was cracked. A jagged, white fissure ran right down the center of the gem. It didn't glow. It didn't pulse with heat. It looked dead.

"Thorne?" she whispered.

She pressed the band to her ear.

Silence.

No **"I AM THE HAMMER."** No **"SMASH."** Just the cold, indifferent silence of a rock.

Sadie slipped the band onto her wrist. It didn't resize to fit her. It was loose, heavy, chafing against her wrist bone. It felt like a shackle.

"I'll fix it," she promised the silence. "I don't know how, but I'll fix it."

She used the captain's console to pull herself up. The bridge of the *Golden Sovereign*—the ship she had stolen, the ship she had crashed to save the world—was a tomb.

She had to find the others.

The corridor leading to the crew quarters was blocked by a collapsed bulkhead.

Sadie squeezed through a gap in the metal, tearing the shoulder of her coat. The air here was hotter, smelling of hydraulic fluid.

"Hello?"

"Over here!" A voice squeaked. "I can't... I can't read it!"

Sadie followed the sound. She found Gubbins crouched in front of a locked blast door. The gnome was frantic. He was holding a piece of wire and a screwdriver, jamming them into the keypad.

"Gubbins," Sadie breathed. She grabbed his shoulder. "You're alive."

Gubbins spun around. His goggles were cracked. He looked at her with wide, terrified eyes.

"Sadie! The code! I can't see the code!" He gestured wildly at the door. "Usually, the numbers just... float! I use **[Technomancy]** and the tumblers click! But now? It's just buttons! It's just stupid, plastic buttons!"

He slammed his small fist against the metal.

"I don't know how to pick a lock!" he wailed. "I’m a Level 40 Engineer! I don't use tools! I use skills!"

"The skills are gone, Gubbins," Sadie said gently. She looked at the door. "We have to do it the hard way."

"The hard way?"

"Jax!" Sadie yelled, pounding on the door. "Are you in there?"

A heavy thud shook the metal.

"Sadie?" Jax’s voice was muffled. "I'm... stuck."

"Open the door, Jax! Pull the manual release!"

"I am!" Jax grunted. "It’s... heavy!"

Sadie frowned. Jax had a Strength stat that allowed him to bench press a tank. A manual door release should have been like tearing paper.

"Try harder!"

GRRRRRRRRR.

The metal groaned. Slowly, agonizingly, the blast door began to slide open. An inch. Two inches.

Fingers appeared in the gap. Calloused, bloody fingers.

Jax heaved. His face appeared in the crack, red with exertion, veins bulging in his neck.

"It’s..." Jax gasped. "...so... heavy."

He managed to slide it open enough to squeeze through. He fell out into the corridor, gasping for air. He looked smaller. His armor was gone—vanished with the System—leaving him in a torn undershirt and cargo pants. He looked at his hands.

"I felt it," Jax whispered, staring at his palms. "The weight. Sadie, I felt every pound of that door. My back hurts. My knees hurt."

He looked up at her, terror in his eyes.

"I’m just a guy," he said. "I’m just a big guy with a bad back."

"You're alive," Sadie said, helping him up. "That’s a stat that matters."

"Where’s Clank?" Gubbins asked, looking into the room behind Jax.

Jax shook his head. "He... stopped. When the blue light hit us. He just... turned off. I think his core was tied to the System’s mana grid. He’s just a statue now."

Sadie felt another pang of loss. Clank, the silent warforged who had guarded her garage, was gone.

"Torque," Sadie said suddenly. "Where is Torque?"

Jax’s face went pale.

"The engine bay," he said. "He wanted to be near the Golem-Drive."

The engine bay was a nightmare.

The massive Golem-Drive—the iron heart Sadie had welded into *The Ledger*—had torn loose during the crash. It sat in the middle of the floor, leaking black oil.

And pinned beneath it was Torque.

The Warlord was still strapped to his stretcher, but the stretcher was crushed under the engine block.

"Torque!" Sadie scrambled over the debris.

The Orc’s eye—the organic one—opened. It was milky, unfocused. His mechanical eye was dark.

"Treasurer," he wheezed. A bubble of black oil burst on his lips.

"Get it off him!" Sadie yelled. "Jax! Lift it!"

Jax rushed forward. He grabbed the engine block. He squatted, bracing his legs. He roared, pulling with everything he had.

The engine moved an inch. Then Jax screamed, clutching his lower back, and dropped it.

"I can't!" Jax cried. "It’s two tons! I can't lift two tons!"

"Use a lever!" Sadie looked around frantically. She grabbed a piece of steel pipe. "Gubbins! Wedge it!"

They worked together, jamming the pipe under the block. Sadie, Jax, and Gubbins hung their weight on the makeshift lever.

CREAAAAAK.

The engine lifted. Just enough.

"Pull him out!" Sadie screamed.

Gubbins scrambled underneath, dragging the stretcher free.

CLANG.

They dropped the engine.

Sadie knelt beside Torque. He looked terrible. His cybernetic arm and leg were dead weight, dragging on the floor like anchors. But worse was his chest.

The interface ports where his organic body met the metal were weeping a dark, foul-smelling fluid.

"Rejection," Gubbins whispered, horrified. "Without the System to regulate the bio-feedback... his body realizes he’s half metal. His immune system is attacking the chrome."

Torque coughed. "I feel... heavy."

"We’ll fix it," Sadie lied. She reached for his wrist, looking for a pulse. It was erratic. Thready. "We just need... we need tools."

"Tools?" Torque laughed weakly. "You need a miracle, Rat. My heart... it runs on Hate. Remember? Kinetic feedback."

He tapped his chest.

"The Hate is gone. It’s just... quiet. The engine is stalling."

Sadie looked at the rusted band on her own wrist. She thought of the cracked Ruby gem.

"We’re all stalling," she whispered.

"Water," Torque rasped. "My radiator... is dry."

Sadie stood up. She looked at Jax and Gubbins. They were covered in dust, bleeding, and looking at her like she had the answers.

She checked her pockets again. Still empty.

"We need supplies," Sadie said. "Water. Bandages. Painkillers. And we can't buy them."

She walked to the airlock of the engine bay. It was twisted, jammed half-open.

Through the gap, she could see the outside world.

"We have to go out there," she said.

"Out there?" Gubbins squeaked. "Sadie, we crashed in the Dead Zone! There’s nothing out there but radiation and monsters!"

"Then we scavenge the monsters," Sadie said. She touched the cold iron of the Treasury. "We survive. That’s the new quest."

She pushed through the gap.

The heat hit her like a physical blow.

Sadie stepped out onto the hull of the *Golden Sovereign*. The massive airship was buried nose-first in the sand, its tail sticking up into the sky like a tombstone.

She looked at the horizon.

The **Gilded Desert**—the mirror-flat wasteland Elara had created—was gone. The "System Reset" had undone the terraforming. The gold had turned back to lead and iron, and the sand had returned.

It was a sea of red dust.

The wind howled, carrying gritty sand that stung her face. The sky was a bruised purple, the sun a harsh white eye staring down at them.

There were no map markers. No floating arrows pointing to "Water." No safe zones.

Sadie looked down at the hull. Scattered across the metal were bars of gold—the millions she had stolen from Elara. They had spilled out of the cargo hold during the crash.

Gubbins gasped. He ran forward, picking up a heavy bar.

"Gold!" he shouted. "Sadie! We're rich! We can buy anything!"

Sadie looked at the bar in his hand.

"Gubbins," she said softly. "Look at it."

Gubbins stared at the metal. "It's... it's gold. Bullion."

"Try to put it in your inventory."

Gubbins paused. He tapped the air. He tried to shove the bar into a pocket dimension that wasn't there.

The bar just sat in his hand. Heavy. Useless.

"Who are you going to pay?" Sadie asked, gesturing to the empty, red horizon. "The System is dead. That's just a soft, heavy rock."

Gubbins looked at the bar. Then he dropped it.

THUD.

It hit the hull with a dull sound.

"It's worthless," Gubbins whispered.

"Not worthless," Sadie said. She picked up the bar. She weighed it in her hand. "It's soft. Low melting point. We can cast it into bullets. Or washers. Or patches for the hull."

She threw it back down.

"But it won't buy us water."

She turned to Jax. "Jax, help me with Torque. We need to move him to the shade under the wing. The sun will cook him in that metal skin."

Jax nodded. He looked at the vast emptiness of the desert.

"Sadie," he said quietly. "How do we know where to go? Without the map?"

Sadie looked at the sun. She looked at the shadows.

"We walk," she said. "We look with our eyes. We listen with our ears."

She adjusted the heavy, rusted band on her wrist. The crack in the Ruby gem caught the sunlight, a jagged wound in the heart of her power.

She felt a phantom pain in her arm—a throb that matched the crack in the stone.

"Durability check," Sadie whispered to herself.

She looked at her team. A de-powered tank. A confused engineer. A dying warlord. And a Level 0 thief with a broken artifact.

"Let's move," Sadie ordered. "Before the vultures figure out we're not dead yet."

She took the first step down the side of the crashed ship, sliding in the red dust, leaving the gold behind.

Chapter 2

The hallway was a vertical shaft of twisted steel and hanging wires.

Sadie Miller stood at the bottom, looking up. In the Old World—the world that had ended yesterday—this had been the Grand Corridor of the *Golden Sovereign*, a carpeted, well-lit passage connecting the engine bay to the officer's quarters. Now, thanks to the crash, the ship was nose-down in the dirt, tilted at a sixty-degree angle. The floor was a wall. The wall was a floor. And the door they needed was thirty feet straight up.

" we have to climb it," Sadie said. Her voice was scratchy, like sandpaper on dry wood.

Jax stood beside her, wiping a smear of grease from his forehead. He looked at the wreckage, then at his own hands. They were big hands, calloused and scarred, but they trembled slightly.

"I don't have **[Climb]**," Jax muttered. "I used to have **[Spider-Climb]** on my boots. I could walk up this like it was flat. Now..."

He kicked the metal wall. It rang with a dull, hollow sound.

"Now it's just gravity," Sadie said. She reached up, grabbing a bundle of severed conduit cables that dangled from the ceiling. She tugged on them. They held.

"Gubbins, you're lightest," Sadie commanded. "You go first. Scout the ledge. Jax, boost him."

Jax bent his knees, interlacing his fingers to form a step. Gubbins, looking like a nervous, soot-stained raccoon in his oversized mechanic's jumpsuit, stepped into the stirrup.

"Up!" Jax grunted.

He heaved. Gubbins flew upward, grabbing the edge of a broken floor plate. The gnome scrambled, his boots scrabbling for purchase, until he hauled himself over the lip of the doorway above.

"I'm up!" Gubbins squeaked, his voice echoing down the shaft. "But... uh... Sadie? You're gonna want to see this."

"See what?"

"Just... come up. Watch your step. It’s slippery."

Sadie looked at Jax. "You next, big guy."

"I weigh two hundred and eighty pounds," Jax said, eyeing the cables. "Those wires aren't rated for non-System load."

"Then don't fall," Sadie said grimly. "Because I don't have a healing potion to fix your neck."

The climb was a nightmare. Every muscle in Sadie’s body screamed. Without the passive **[Endurance]** buff she had relied on for years, her arms burned within seconds. The wire bit into her palms, cutting the skin. She felt the heavy, dead weight of the **Soulbound Treasury** on her left wrist, dragging her down like an anchor.

She pulled herself up, hand over hand, gasping for air. Sweat stung her eyes.

She crested the ledge and rolled onto the flat surface of the upper deck, panting.

"That was..." she wheezed, staring at the ceiling. "...awful."

"Sadie," Gubbins whispered.

Sadie sat up. She looked where the gnome was pointing.

The hallway ahead had split open during the impact. The wall of the Purser’s Vault—the ship’s treasury—had ruptured.

It looked like a golden landslide.

Thousands of gold bars had spilled out, cascading down the tilted corridor, piling up against the bulkheads in drifts three feet deep. It was enough wealth to buy the Black-Iron Bastion ten times over. It was enough to hire an army, build a fleet, and retire to a floating island.

And now, it was just debris.

"Look at it," Gubbins drooled, a reflex from his old life kicking in. He scrambled forward, wading into the sea of bullion. He grabbed two heavy bars, clutching them to his chest. "We're rich, Sadie! We're kings!"

Sadie stood up. Her legs wobbled. She walked over to the gold.

She kicked a bar.

THUD.

It didn't slide into an inventory. It didn't vanish with a satisfying *cha-ching* sound. It just hit her toe.

"Ow," Sadie hissed.

"We can take it," Gubbins said, stuffing a bar into his jumpsuit pocket. The fabric tore under the weight. "We can fill our... our..."

He looked around for a bag. He didn't have one.

"It's heavy, Gubbins," Sadie said softly. She picked up a bar. It weighed nearly thirty pounds. "How many can you carry? Two? Three?"

"I... I can make a sled!" Gubbins insisted. "We can drag it!"

"And drag it where?" Sadie asked. She looked down the corridor, toward the jagged hole in the hull where the red dust of the desert was blowing in. "To the horizon? Through the sand? We don't have water, Gubbins. We don't have food. You want to die of thirst dragging soft metal through a wasteland?"

Jax pulled himself up over the ledge. He stood up, breathing hard. He looked at the gold.

He didn't look greedy. He looked tired.

"It's trash," Jax said. He picked up a bar and threw it. It clattered down the hallway, ringing like a bell. "It's just heavy trash."

Gubbins looked at the bar in his hand. He looked at Sadie’s empty, serious eyes.

Slowly, reluctantly, he dropped the gold.

"It’s really pretty trash," the gnome whispered.

"Let's move," Sadie said, stepping over the pile of millions. "The galley should be this way. We need calories, not currency."

They moved deeper into the ship. The air grew stale, smelling of ozone and something else—something sharp and electric that made the hair on Sadie’s arms stand up.

They reached the junction near the secondary reactor. The corridor here was dark, the emergency lights having failed hours ago.

"Hold up," Sadie said, stopping abruptly.

"What is it?" Jax whispered, drawing his rusted mace. "Scavengers?"

"No," Sadie said. "Look."

She pointed to the wall near the reactor housing.

It wasn't damaged. It wasn't burnt.

It was... wrong.

A tear in the air hung suspended in the middle of the hallway. It was about six feet tall, jagged and vibrating, like a paused frame in a corrupted video file. The edges of the tear glowed with a sickly, violet light that didn't cast shadows. Inside the tear, there was nothing but a swirling, chaotic static that hurt the eyes to focus on.

HISSSSSS.

A sound emanated from it—like steam escaping a high-pressure valve, but layered with whispers.

"What is that?" Gubbins whimpered, backing away. "Is that a portal?"

Sadie took a step closer. The iron band on her wrist suddenly grew hot. Not the warm, comforting heat of the Trinity, but a sharp, stinging burn.

She looked at the Ruby gem. The crack in Thorne’s stone seemed to pulse in time with the violet light.

"It’s a glitch," Sadie whispered. "The System didn't just crash. It broke the world on the way out."

She reached out a hand toward the anomaly. The air around it felt greasy. Cold.

"Don't touch it," Jax warned, grabbing her shoulder. "Sadie, that thing... my brain hurts just looking at it. It feels... radioactive."

Sadie pulled her hand back. Her head was pounding. A migraine blossomed behind her eyes, sharp and sudden.

"It’s bleeding," Sadie realized. "The magic... the raw code of the world... it’s leaking out. Like radiation."

She stared at the violet tear. It was mesmerizing. Terrifying. It felt like a door to somewhere that shouldn't exist.

"Thorne," she whispered to the band. "Can you feel that?"

The band was silent. But the heat persisted, a warning throb against her pulse.

"Sadie," Jax said urgency in his voice. "We need water. Torque is drying out back there."

Sadie shook her head, breaking the trance. She looked away from the tear. The migraine receded slightly.

"Right," she said. "Water first. Weird magic holes second."

She skirted the edge of the hallway, pressing her back against the far wall to avoid getting too close to the anomaly.

"Don't look at it," Sadie ordered. "Just keep walking."

They shuffled past the hissing violet wound in reality. Sadie felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle, as if something inside the tear was watching her go.

The **Officer's Mess** was a wreck.

Tables made of mahogany and brass were overturned. Crystal chandeliers lay shattered on the floor, crunching under their boots like diamond gravel. The air smelled thick and sweet—the scent of rotting luxury.

"Check the pantry," Sadie ordered. "I'll check the bar."

She vaulted over the bar counter. It was stocked with the finest spirits the Guild could buy. Bottles of Elven Moonglow Wine, Dwarven Fire-Brandy, and aged whiskey from the Sky-Citadels.

In the old days, a single bottle of the Moonglow would have fetched 500 gold on the auction house. It buffed **[Mana Regeneration]** by 50% for an hour.

Sadie picked up a bottle. The blue liquid swirled inside.

"Useless," she muttered.

She needed hydration. Alcohol was a diuretic. Drinking this would just kill her faster in the desert sun.

She smashed the neck of the bottle against the counter.

CRASH.

She sniffed it. It smelled like blueberries and ozone. She poured it onto the floor.

"Water," she hissed, tossing the empty bottle aside. "Where is the damn water?"

"I found crackers!" Gubbins shouted from the pantry. "They're stale! And... uh... caviar. A lot of caviar."

"Salt," Jax grunted from the back. "We can't eat salt."

Sadie kicked a cabinet open.

There, hidden behind a rack of expensive crystal decanters, was a plastic crate.

[Emergency Rations: Potable Water]

It was a Guild-standard survival crate. Twelve one-gallon jugs of clear, boring, un-magical water.

"Jackpot," Sadie breathed.

She grabbed a jug. She cracked the seal. She didn't bother with a glass. She upended it, letting the lukewarm water flood her mouth.

It tasted like plastic. It tasted like life.

She lowered the jug, gasping. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

"We found it," she called out. "Pack it up. Every drop."

As Jax and Gubbins started loading the heavy jugs into canvas sacks they'd scavenged, Sadie leaned against the bar. Her reflection caught in the mirror behind the shelves.

She froze.

She hadn't seen herself since the crash. Since the Reset.

In the System days, mirrors were just cosmetic tools. You used them to check your gear skins or adjust your avatar's hair. You always looked... optimized. Clean. High-resolution.

The girl in the mirror was a stranger.

Her face was smeared with black grease and dried blood. Her hair, usually a sharp, silver bob, was matted and wild. Her eyes were rimmed with red exhaustion.

But it was the skin that shocked her.

There was a scar running from her ear to her jawline. A jagged, white line.

"I don't have a scar there," she whispered.

She touched it. Her fingers felt the ridge of tough, healed tissue.

She remembered a fight in the sewers, back when she was Level 3. A Rat-King had scratched her. She had popped a healing potion, and the HP bar had refilled. The wound had vanished.

Or so she thought.

"The System," she realized. "It just... painted over the damage. It didn't fix it. It just hid it."

She pulled her collar down. Another scar on her collarbone—from a crossbow bolt in Sector 4. A burn mark on her forearm—from the magma splash.

She was a map of every mistake she had ever made.

"I'm ugly," she whispered.

"You're alive," Jax said.

He was standing behind her, holding two gallons of water in each massive hand. He looked at her reflection.

"The scars mean you survived, Sadie," Jax said softly. "The System made us look like dolls. This? This is honest."

Sadie stared at herself. She touched the scar on her cheek again. It wasn't pretty. It was rough. It was real.

She looked at her chest. No health bar hovered there. No numbers told her she was at 100%. She had to ask herself: *How do I feel?*

She felt like hell.

"I'm tired, Jax," she admitted.

"Me too, boss," Jax nodded. "Me too. But Torque needs a drink."

Sadie turned away from the mirror. She turned away from the stranger with the scars.

"Right," she said, her voice hardening. "Pack the bags. We're moving out."

They left the mess hall carrying sixty pounds of water.

It was brutal. Without an inventory, the weight was a constant, dragging force. The straps of the canvas bags dug into Sadie’s shoulders, cutting off circulation.

They walked back past the pile of gold.

Gubbins paused. He looked at the millions of gold bars lying in the dust. He looked at the heavy jug of water in his hand.

He adjusted his grip on the water. He didn't look back at the gold.

They walked past the violet tear in reality.

It was pulsing faster now. The hissing sound had deepened into a low, rhythmic throb, like a heartbeat.

Sadie stopped. She felt the iron band on her wrist vibrating. The crack in the Ruby gem was hot enough to burn her skin.

"Hungry," a voice whispered.

It wasn't Thorne. It wasn't Valerius. It was the tear.

"Sadie?" Jax asked, seeing her stop.

Sadie looked at the glitch. She knew, with a scavenger’s instinct, that this thing was important. It was the source of the magic. It was the problem.

But she looked at the water jug. She thought of Torque dying under the wing.

"Not today," Sadie said.

She turned her back on the magic. She turned her back on the mystery.

"Today we survive," she said. "Tomorrow we figure out why the world is broken."

They climbed back down the twisted corridors, descending into the heat of the red dust, carrying the only treasure that mattered anymore: plastic jugs of warm, stale water.

Chapter 3

The sound of Torque dying was wet, grinding, and rhythmic.

It sounded like a bag of gravel being chewed up by a garbage disposal.

Under the jagged shadow of the *Golden Sovereign's* severed wing, the Warlord thrashed against the sand. His body was a war zone. The organic half—the green, scarred Orc flesh—was fever-hot, slick with sweat and black bio-fluid. The mechanical half—the chrome limbs and the massive Golem-Drive slammed into his chest—was freezing cold, frosted with condensation.

"Hold him down!" Gubbins shrieked, his voice cracking. The gnome was sitting on Torque's chest, a screwdriver in one hand and a bundle of greasy wires in the other. "He's vibrating too much! I can't find the port!"

Jax leaned his entire body weight onto Torque's organic arm, pinning it to the dirt. "Just cut the wire, Gubbins! Bypass the governor!"

"Which wire?" Gubbins wailed, tears cutting tracks through the grease on his face. He held up a fistful of tangled cables—red, blue, yellow, and striped. "Without the **[Scan]**... they're just wires! I don't know which one carries the signal and which one carries the voltage! If I cut the wrong one, his heart stops!"

Sadie stood over them, her hands hovering uselessly.

In the old days—yesterday—this would have been a quick time event. A blue prompt would have appeared: **[Repair: Intelligence Check]**. She would have tapped 'Yes,' Gubbins would have rolled a success, and a green light would have washed over Torque, sealing the wounds.

Now, there was just blood. It smelled like copper and rot.

Torque arched his back, a guttural roar tearing from his throat. The Golem-Drive in his chest whined, the pistons firing out of sync with his heartbeat.

CLUNK-HISSS.

A jet of steam shot out of the intake valve, scalding Gubbins' hand. The gnome dropped the screwdriver, scrambling backward.

"I can't do it!" Gubbins sobbed, clutching his burned fingers. "I'm blind, Sadie! I'm stupid! I don't know how the machine *works*, I only know how to press the button!"

Torque convulsed one last time, then slumped back into the bloody sand. His organic eye rolled back, showing the whites. His chest heaved, shallow and ragged.

"He's stabilizing," Jax whispered, checking the pulse on the Orc's neck. "But it's bad, Sadie. He's burning up."

Sadie knelt in the dust. She reached out and touched the metal casing of the engine block embedded in Torque's sternum. It burned her fingertips.

"It's rejection," she whispered. "The System used to buffer the connection. It translated the biology into code so the metal wouldn't kill him. Now... now he's just a man with an engine crushing his lungs."

Torque's eye fluttered open. It was hazy, filled with pain. He looked at Sadie, then at the weeping gnome.

"Fluid," the Warlord rasped. Pink froth bubbled on his lips.

"Water?" Sadie asked, reaching for a canteen. "We have water."

"No," Torque wheezed. He tapped the metal casing on his chest with a trembling finger. "Coolant. Alchemical... stabilizer. Blue viscosity. Need... a buffer."

Sadie looked at Gubbins. "Do we have any?"

Gubbins shook his head, sniffling. "The ship's coolant is toxic. It's for starship reactors, not cyborgs. If we put that in him, it'll dissolve his veins. We need medical grade. High-end stuff."

"Where do we get that?" Jax asked, looking at the empty red horizon. "The nearest pharmacy is in the Bastion, and that's a three-day walk."

"He doesn't have three days," Sadie said. She stood up, wiping her bloody hands on her coat. "He has maybe twelve hours."

She looked out at the wasteland. The heat waves were shimmering off the red dust, distorting the distance.

"There," she said, pointing.

On the edge of the horizon, a thin plume of brown dust was rising against the purple sky. It was moving slowly, tracking north-to-south.

"Dust storm?" Jax asked, shading his eyes.

"Too directional," Sadie said. "That’s a caravan."

She felt a flicker of the old instinct—the Treasurer’s calculation. A caravan meant trade. Trade meant inventory. Inventory meant salvation.

"Nomads," she said. "Scavengers. They move between the settlements. They’ll have supplies. Medicine. Coolant."

She turned back to the wreckage of the ship. She scrambled up the side of the hull to where the pile of gold bars lay scattered in the sun. She grabbed one. It was heavy, soft, and stamped with the Guild seal.

[Value: 5,000 Gold]

The tag didn't appear, but she knew the worth. This single bar could buy a small house. It could buy a tank. Surely, it could buy a liter of blue fluid.

"Sadie," Jax warned, stepping up beside her. "Those aren't NPCs. They’re Dust-Nomads. They eat beetles and drink cactus juice. They don't care about exchange rates."

"Everything has a price, Jax," Sadie said, hefting the bar. The weight of it felt reassuring in her hand. It was the only weapon she knew how to use. "I’m going to buy his life."

She tightened the strap of her coat.

"Stay with Torque. Keep him cool. I’ll be back with the cure."

The walk was brutal.

Sadie had forgotten what it felt like to walk without **[Endurance]**. Within twenty minutes, her lungs were burning. Within thirty, her boots—expensive Guild leather she'd bought in the Upper City—were rubbing blisters onto her heels.

The dust cloud grew larger.

As she got closer, the shapes resolved. It wasn't a convoy of trucks. It was beasts.

Massive, chitin-plated beetles the size of minivans lumbered through the sand. They were harnessed together with rusted chains, pulling sleds made of scrap metal and bone. The creatures clicked and hissed, their mandibles dripping green saliva.

Riding atop the lead beetle was a woman. She was wrapped in layers of grey rags, her face covered by a mask made from a wolf's skull. She held a long spear tipped with a jagged piece of glass.

Sadie stopped in their path. She stood tall, trying to project the authority of a Level 100 Treasurer, even though she was a Level 0 wreck.

"Halt!" Sadie shouted, holding up her empty hand. "I want to trade!"

The caravan didn't stop. The lead beetle kept plodding forward, its multi-faceted eyes dead and unblinking.

Sadie didn't move. She stood her ground, forcing the beast to stop or run her over.

At the last second, the woman on the beetle yanked the reins. The creature hissed, its legs digging into the sand, kicking up a cloud of red grit. It stopped three feet from Sadie's face. The smell was overpowering—musk, rot, and spices.

The woman slid down the side of the beetle. She landed silently in the sand. She was tall, lean, and dangerous. She pulled off the wolf-skull mask, revealing a face that looked like leather tanned in the sun. Her eyes were milky white—blind, or maybe just adapted to the glare.

"You stand in the road, soft-skin," the woman rasped. Her voice sounded like two stones grinding together. "You want to be roadkill?"

"I want to do business," Sadie said. She reached into her coat and pulled out the gold bar.

She held it out. The sun caught the metal, making it gleam with a pure, impossible luster against the dirty background of the wastes.

"Gold," Sadie said. "Pure bullion. Guild stamp. Worth five thousand credits in any city."

The woman—**Kara**—looked at the gold. She didn't gasp. She didn't smile. She tilted her head, like a bird watching a worm.

"Gold," Kara repeated. She reached out a hand wrapped in dirty bandages.

Sadie placed the bar in her palm.

Kara hefted it. She rubbed her thumb over the stamp. Then, she brought it to her mouth and bit it.

CLINK.

She spat.

"Soft," Kara said. "Useless."

"Useless?" Sadie blinked. "That’s five thousand—"

"Can I eat it?" Kara interrupted.

"No, but—"

"Can I shoot it from a sling?" Kara asked. "Too heavy. Travels short. Drops fast."

"You trade it!" Sadie insisted, her voice rising. "You take it to the Bastion and you buy food! You buy water! It’s currency!"

Kara laughed. It was a dry, hacking sound.

"Bastion is burning, little rat. The Guild is gone. The sky-ships fell. The only currency is calorie and steel."

She looked at the gold bar with contempt.

"You offer me a yellow rock that I have to carry," Kara said. "It weighs five pounds. That is five pounds of water I cannot carry. Five pounds of meat I cannot carry."

She threw the bar into the sand.

THUD.

"Go away," Kara said, turning back to her beetle. "Before I decide you are worth the calories to kill."

Sadie stared at the gold in the dirt. Her brain couldn't process it. It was money. It was power. It was the answer.

"I need stabilizer fluid!" Sadie screamed. She lunged forward, grabbing Kara’s arm. "My friend is dying! I know you have it! I saw the crates on the sled!"

It was a mistake.

In the System days, grabbing an NPC would have initiated a **[Grapple Check]**. Sadie’s high stats would have won.

In the real world, Kara spun around with terrifying speed. She didn't use a skill. She used a fist.

CRACK.

Kara’s backhand caught Sadie across the cheekbone.

The world spun. Sadie’s vision flashed white. She hit the sand hard, tasting blood. It wasn't a **[-10 HP]** floating number. It was pain. Dizzying, nauseating pain.

Sadie tried to scramble up, but a boot slammed into her chest, pinning her to the ground.

Two other nomads had jumped from the sleds. They stood over her, spears raised.

Kara loomed over her. She looked down at Sadie’s feet.

"Nice boots," Kara said.

"Take the gold!" Sadie wheezed, clutching the iron band on her wrist to protect it. "Just take the gold!"

"I don't want the rock," Kara said. She drew a knife. "I want the leather."

She knelt on Sadie’s chest. The knife cut the laces of Sadie’s high-grade Guild boots.

"Stop!" Sadie kicked out, but she was weak. So weak. "Please!"

Kara yanked the boots off. She threw them to one of the other nomads. Then she looked at Sadie’s coat.

"Too many holes," Kara decided. "Keep it."

She stood up. She kicked sand into Sadie’s face.

"Lesson for you, soft-skin," Kara said, climbing back onto her beetle. "Value is what keeps you alive. That rock?" She pointed to the gold bar. "That rock is just a heavy way to die."

The caravan began to move. The beetles clicked and hissed, their massive legs churning the sand. The sleds creaked past.

Sadie lay in the dirt, barefoot, bleeding, and stunned.

She watched them go. They didn't even look back. She wasn't a threat. She wasn't a player. She was just debris on the road.

The walk back was a penance.

The sun was at its zenith. The red sand was hot enough to cook an egg.

Sadie walked barefoot.

Every step was agony. The sand burned the soles of her feet. Sharp rocks cut her skin. Thorns from scrub-brush tore at her ankles.

She limped, her head hanging low, her hair matted with sweat and blood.

In her right hand, she clutched the gold bar.

She should have left it. It was five pounds of dead weight. It was the reason she had been beaten. It was the symbol of her stupidity.

But she couldn't let go.

She gripped it until her knuckles turned white. It was all she had left of the Treasurer.

Jax met her a mile out from the crash site. He had seen her limping and come running, carrying a length of pipe.

"Sadie!" He dropped the pipe and caught her as she stumbled. "What happened? Did they attack you?"

He looked at her bruised face. He looked at her bare, bleeding feet.

"They took your boots," Jax whispered, his voice full of horror. "They robbed you?"

"They didn't want the gold," Sadie rasped. Her voice was cracked and dry. She held up the bar. "Jax... they didn't want the gold."

She started to laugh. It was a broken, hysterical sound.

"They wanted my shoes. I offered them a kingdom, and they took my shoes."

Jax took the heavy bar from her hand. He looked at it with disgust, then shoved it into his pocket. He scooped Sadie up in his arms. He wasn't as strong as he used to be, and he grunted with the effort, but he carried her.

"We have to get back," Jax said. "Torque... he’s getting worse."

Sadie rested her head against Jax’s chest. She closed her eyes, but she could still see Kara’s face. The contempt. The truth.

"I failed him," Sadie whispered into Jax’s shirt. "I went to buy a life, and I came back with change."

Jax carried her through the heat, back to the shadow of the broken ship. Back to the dying Warlord and the weeping gnome. Back to a world where she was Level 0, and the only thing plummeting faster than her bank account was her hope.

She held her left wrist against her chest. The iron band was cold against her skin.

"Broken," she thought.

The gold was soft. The iron was cracked. And Sadie Miller was finally, completely, broke.

Chapter 4

The night didn't bring relief. It just brought the cold.

The desert temperature plummeted the moment the sun dipped below the jagged horizon, turning the red dust from a frying pan into an icebox. Sadie Miller lay curled in a ball under the twisted overhang of the *Golden Sovereign's* severed wing, shivering violently. Her coat—the one Kara the Nomad had deemed "too full of holes" to steal—was thin protection against the biting wind.

But it wasn't the cold that kept her awake. It was the sound.

Hrr-glug... Hrr-glug...

Ten feet away, Torque was drowning.

The Warlord's chest rose and fell in a spasmodic, terrifying rhythm. Every breath was a battle between his organic lungs and the two-ton Golem-Drive crushing them. The bio-fluid leaking from his interface ports had pooled in the sand, smelling of rot and old battery acid.

Jax sat beside the Orc, his massive shoulders slumped. He held a canteen cap filled with water, trying to drip it between Torque's tusks. Most of it just ran down the Warlord's chin.

"He's not swallowing," Jax whispered. His voice was hollow, stripped of its usual boom. "Sadie... he's checked out."

Sadie didn't answer. She stared at her feet.

Jax had wrapped them in strips of cloth torn from the ship's curtains—velvet and silk, stained with grease. They were a poor substitute for the high-grade leather boots she had lost. Every throb of her bruised toes was a reminder of her humiliation.

Five thousand gold, she thought bitterly. *I offered a kingdom, and I got mugged for my shoes.*

Gubbins was asleep, or pretending to be. The gnome lay curled against Clank's frozen metal legs, twitching in his dreams. He was muttering about wire gauges and voltage regulators, trying to solve a puzzle that no longer had a solution.

Sadie closed her eyes. She tried to summon the menu. Just once. Just to see the clock.

System.

Nothing. Just the darkness behind her eyelids and the relentless, wet rattle of Torque's breathing.

She was Level 0. She was broke. She was useless.

Maybe we just stay here, a treacherous voice whispered in her ear. *Maybe we just wait. The water will run out in three days. The heat will take us. It's better than walking.*

Then, her wrist caught fire.

HISSS.

Sadie yelped, slapping her hand against the sand.

It wasn't a spark. It was the **Soulbound Treasury**.

The iron band was vibrating. It wasn't the gentle, notification hum of the old days. It was a violent, tectonic shudder, like an engine tearing itself apart.

Sadie scrambled to a sitting position, clutching her wrist. The metal was searing hot.

"Jax!" she gasped.

Jax looked up, dropping the canteen cap. "What? Are they back? The nomads?"

"No," Sadie hissed through her teeth. She held up her arm. "The band. It's... cooking."

In the darkness, the Ruby gem—Thorne’s prison—was glowing. But it wasn't the steady, defiant crimson light of the Berserker. It was a flickering, sickly strobe. The crack running down the center of the stone pulsed with a jagged white light, like a vein of lightning trapped in glass.

CRACK.

The sound was loud enough to wake Gubbins. A tiny fissure appeared in the iron surrounding the gem.

"It’s breaking," Gubbins squeaked, crawling closer on his hands and knees. "Sadie, take it off! It’s going to explode!"

"I can't!" Sadie screamed. "It’s soulbound! It doesn't have a latch!"

She clawed at the iron, burning her fingertips. The smell of singed skin filled the small shelter. The heat was intensifying, radiating up her forearm, turning her veins black.

"Thorne!" Sadie yelled at the gem. "Stop it! You're hurting me!"

The gem didn't answer. It just screamed—a high-pitched, psychic wail that pierced Sadie’s skull like a needle.

Then, the world turned white.

BOOM.

It wasn't an explosion of shrapnel. It was an explosion of presence.

A pillar of blinding, golden fire erupted from the band. It shot upward, blasting through the twisted metal of the wing above them, illuminating the desert night with the force of a supernova.

Sadie was thrown back against the sand. Jax covered his eyes. Gubbins curled into a ball.

The fire didn't fade. It coalesced.

hovering three feet above the ground was a figure. It looked like **Valerius**, the Paladin. But this wasn't the noble, polished knight Sadie knew.

This Valerius was a catastrophe.

His armor was made of molten light, dripping like wax. His face was a blur of static. He wasn't standing; he was tearing himself out of reality, burning his own essence just to exist in the physical plane without the System's support.

"WIELDER!"

The voice wasn't spoken. It was projected directly into their bones. It sounded like a cathedral bell tolling in a storm.

"Val!" Sadie screamed, shielding her face from the heat. "What are you doing? You're killing us!"

Valerius turned his burning head toward her. He looked terrified.

"THE WALLS... ARE CRUMBLING," the spirit roared. He pointed a flickering finger at the Ruby gem on Sadie's wrist. **"HE IS... TOO LOUD. THE SILENCE... IT AMPLIFIES HIM."**

"Who?" Sadie scrambled backward, kicking up sand. "Thorne?"

"HE IS RELIVING IT," Valerius's form flickered, turning transparent for a second before surging back to blinding brightness. **"THE BETRAYAL. THE SEALING. WITHOUT THE SYSTEM TO FILTER THE MEMORY... HE IS TRAPPED IN THE MOMENT OF HIS DEATH."**

Sadie stared at the band. The Ruby gem was vibrating so fast it was a blur.

"He's panicking," Sadie realized. "He's a ghost in a locked room, and he's thrashing."

"HE IS BREAKING THE VESSEL," Valerius warned. **"LOOK AT THE IRON, SADIE. LOOK AT IT."**

Sadie forced herself to look.

The crack in the iron band had widened. A hairline fracture ran from the Ruby setting all the way to the Amber one.

"IF THE IRON SNAPS... THE VACUUM TAKES HIM," Valerius's voice dropped, trembling with a very human fear. **"HE WILL NOT RETURN TO THE INVENTORY. HE WILL DISSIPATE. HE WILL BE... UNMADE."**

"No," Sadie whispered.

Thorne wasn't just a sword. He was the one who had saved her in the sewers. He was the one who had held the line against Elara. He was the angry, loud, violent brother she never had.

"How do I fix it?" Sadie yelled. "I don't have tools! I don't have a forge!"

"PHYSICAL TOOLS... ARE USELESS," Valerius boomed. **"YOU CANNOT WELD A SOUL WITH FLAME. YOU NEED... RESONANCE. YOU NEED RAW MATTER."**

The spirit spun around, pointing toward the north. Toward the crashed hull of the *Golden Sovereign*. Toward the dark, twisted corridor where they had seen the violet tear.

"THE BLEEDING," Valerius said. **"THE GLITCH IN THE WORLD. DO YOU SEE IT?"**

Sadie scrambled up, looking past the wreckage.

In the distance, hovering over the dunes like a mirage, was the violet anomaly she had ignored earlier. In the daylight, it had been a tear. At night, it was a beacon. It pulsed with a chaotic, purple light that made the stars above it look dim.

"THE SYSTEM LEFT A WOUND," Valerius explained. **"RAW MAGIC. UNFILTERED CREATION CODE. IT IS THE ONLY FIRE HOT ENOUGH TO RE-FORGE THE BAND."**

"The glitch?" Gubbins squeaked. "You want us to go *into* the glitch? That thing gave me a nosebleed from fifty feet away!"

"IT IS POISON," Valerius agreed. **"BUT IT IS ALSO THE CURE. YOU MUST TAKE HIM THERE. YOU MUST BATH THE IRON IN THE BLOOD OF THE WORLD."**

The spirit began to fade. The golden fire dimmed, turning to grey smoke. Valerius dropped to one knee in the air, his form losing cohesion.

"HURRY, SADIE," he whispered, his voice fading to a static hiss. **"I CANNOT... HOLD HIM... MUCH LONGER."**

FZ Z Z T.

With a sound like a blown fuse, Valerius vanished.

The desert plunged back into darkness.

The silence returned.

But the heat remained. The iron band was still searing hot against Sadie’s skin, throbbing in time with her racing heart.

Sadie sat in the sand, gasping for air. Her arm was red and blistered where the metal touched her.

"Did you see that?" Gubbins whispered. "He looked... he looked like he was burning."

"He *was* burning," Sadie said grimly. "He used his own durability just to talk to us."

She looked at the band. The crack in the Ruby gem was a physical line now. She could feel it with her thumb.

"He’s dying," Sadie said. "Thorne is dying. And if he goes, the band breaks. And if the band breaks..."

She looked at Valerius’s empty setting.

"...we lose them all."

Jax stood up. He walked to the edge of the shelter and looked north, toward the violet pulse of the anomaly.

"That thing is miles away," Jax said. "And we don't know what’s inside it. It’s raw magic, Sadie. Glitch-magic. It twists things."

Sadie looked at Torque. The Warlord’s breathing had changed. The rattle was gone, replaced by a shallow, desperate wheeze. He was turning grey.

She looked at her feet, wrapped in dirty rags.

She was tired. She was hurt. She was terrified.

But she wasn't alone.

"We can't stay here," Sadie said. She stood up. Her legs shook, but they held.

"Sadie," Gubbins warned. "That glitch... it’s not a dungeon. It’s a hole in reality. If we walk into it, we might not come out."

"Torque is dead by morning if we stay," Sadie said, pointing at the Orc. "Thorne is gone by tomorrow if we don't fix the iron."

She tightened the strap of her coat. She looked at the violet light pulsating in the distance. It looked angry. It looked wrong.

"We’re going," Sadie said.

"How?" Jax asked, gesturing to Torque. "He weighs four hundred pounds. You want to carry him?"

Sadie walked over to the wreckage of the wing. She pointed to a curved panel of white polymer, ripped from the hull.

"A sled," Sadie said. "We build a travois. We drag him."

"Through the sand?" Jax asked. "Without boots?"

Sadie looked him in the eye.

"You said you felt the weight of the door, Jax. You said you’re just a big guy now."

She grabbed the edge of the panel and heaved. It moved two inches.

"Well, I’m just a scavenger," Sadie said. "And scavengers don't leave good scrap behind."

She looked at Torque, then at the band on her wrist.

"And we don't leave family behind either."

Jax stared at her for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded. He walked over and grabbed the other end of the panel.

"Gubbins," Jax grunted. "Find some wire. We're building a sled."

They worked in the dark. It took an hour to rig the panel with cables. It took another hour to roll Torque's massive, feverish body onto it and strap him down.

When they were done, Sadie looped the cable over her shoulder. Jax took the other side.

"Ready?" Sadie asked.

The iron band pulsed hot against her wrist, a rhythmic warning.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Ready," Jax said.

They stepped out from under the wing.

The wind hit them, carrying the scent of ozone and wrongness from the north. The violet light of the **Bleeding Canyon** lit their path, casting long, twisted shadows across the red dust.

Sadie leaned into the harness. The weight of the Warlord dug into her shoulder. Her bare feet sank into the cold sand.

She took the first step. Then the second.

They were walking away from the wreck. Away from the gold. Into the glitch.

"Hold on, Thorne," Sadie whispered into the wind. "I'm coming."

Chapter 5

The math didn't add up, but Sadie kept doing it anyway.

Distance to target: Eight miles. Average walking speed: 2.5 miles per hour. Drag coefficient of a four-hundred-pound Orc on a polymer sled over loose sand: High.

"Step," Sadie muttered, staring at the patch of red dust directly in front of her feet. "Step. Step. Breathe."

She leaned forward, the cable of the makeshift travois digging a trench into her shoulder. Beside her, Jax was a wall of silent, sweating muscle, taking the brunt of the weight. But Sadie refused to let the line go slack. She kept the tension tight, pulling until her calf muscles screamed and her lungs burned with the dry, metallic air of the wastes.

"Sadie," Jax grunted, his breath hitching. "We need... to slow down."

"No," Sadie rasped, not looking up. "If we maintain this pace, we hit the perimeter of the Glitch in three hours. We have exactly four hours of sunlight left. If we stop, we lose the light. If we lose the light, we hit the temperature drop. We can't afford the calorie loss of shivering."

"Sadie," Jax said, louder this time. He dug his heels in, forcing the sled to a halt. The sudden stop jerked Sadie backward, nearly pulling her off her feet.

She spun around, eyes wild. "Why did you stop? The timer is running!"

"There is no timer!" Jax shouted, his voice cracking with exhaustion. He dropped the cable, his chest heaving. "Look at us, Sadie! We aren't machines! Gubbins passed out ten minutes ago, he’s just walking in his sleep!"

Sadie looked back. The gnome was indeed stumbling, clutching the back of the sled like a lifeline, his eyes glazed over.

"We rest," Jax ordered. He sank to his knees in the sand, grabbing a water jug. "Five minutes. Or I drop."

Sadie vibrated with nervous energy. Her brain was itching. Without the System to organize her reality, she felt exposed, like a wire stripped of insulation. She needed to be doing something. Solving something.

"Fine," she snapped. "Five minutes. Hydrate. I'll check the gear."

She didn't sit. She didn't drink. She marched over to Torque, who was strapped to the white polymer panel like a prisoner. The Warlord was unconscious, his skin radiating heat.

Sadie ignored him. She looked at her wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was angry.

The iron band was vibrating against her radius bone, a low-frequency hum that made her teeth ache. The crack in the Ruby gem—Thorne's prison—had widened. A faint, red mist was leaking from it, curling into the air like smoke.

"Leaking," Sadie whispered. "You're leaking equity."

She dug into her pockets. She pulled out the coil of copper wire she had scavenged from the bridge.

"Hardware fix," she muttered. "It's just a containment breach. Structural integrity issue."

She sat in the sand and began to wrap the wire around the iron band. She wound it tight, twisting the copper with manic precision, trying to create a physical brace over the cracking gemstone.

"Sadie?" Gubbins crawled over, wiping dust from his goggles. "What are you doing?"

"Reinforcing the housing," Sadie said, pulling the wire tight with her teeth. "If I clamp it down, the fissure can't expand. Basic mechanics."

Gubbins reached out a trembling hand. "Sadie... that's a soul-gem. It's not a pipe. You can't fix a spirit leak with copper wire."

"Watch me," Sadie hissed. She tied off the knot, pressing the sharp ends of the wire down so they wouldn't snag her coat. "It's pressure. If I apply

enough pounds per square inch, the crack stays closed. Thorne stays inside. We get to the Canyon. We re-forge. Simple."

She tapped the band. It looked ridiculous—a legendary artifact wrapped in scrap metal like a hobo's locket. But the red mist stopped leaking.

"See?" Sadie grinned. It was a tight, rictus smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Fixed. It's just durability. Everything has a durability stat. You just have to maintain it."

Gubbins looked at the wire. He looked at the frantic terror in Sadie's eyes. He didn't say anything. He just took a sip of water and looked away.

The heat shimmer was playing tricks on her.

An hour later, they were moving again. The sun was dipping lower, turning the red dust into a sea of blood.

Sadie was hallucinating.

Every time she blinked, she saw the UI. A ghostly blue health bar hovering over Jax's head. A stamina wheel draining in the corner of her vision. But when she shook her head, the numbers dissolved into heat haze.

Then she saw it.

About two hundred yards to the east, rising out of a cluster of jagged rocks.

A pillar of blue light.

[Safe Zone: Resting Point]

The text was clear. Crisp. It was the standard System font.

"Jax!" Sadie gasped, dropping the sled cable. "Look!"

"What?" Jax groaned, not looking up from the ground.

"Safe Zone!" Sadie pointed. "Right there! See the beacon? It's active! The System isn't dead—it's just patchy! We found a node!"

She started to run.

"Sadie, wait!" Jax yelled.

Sadie didn't wait. She sprinted across the sand, her rags flapping around her bare feet. She ignored the pain in her lungs. She ignored the blisters popping on her heels.

Safe Zone. Water fountain. Vendor. Save point.

She could fix Torque. She could buy boots. She could sleep without fear.

She scrambled up the rocky incline, her hands clawing at the stone.

"I'm here!" she laughed, reaching for the blue light. "System! Access store!"

She slapped her hand against the rock.

THWACK.

Stone. Hot, rough, unforgiving stone.

There was no light. No text. No blue pillar.

Just a rock formation shaped like a finger pointing at the sky, baking in the sun.

Sadie stood there, her hand pressed against the rock. She blinked, waiting for the menu to load.

"Load," she whispered. "Please load."

A lizard scurried out from under the rock, hissing at her.

The wind howled.

There was no System. It was just a trick of the light and a desperate brain firing misfires.

Sadie felt a scream building in her chest. A primal, angry shriek that wanted to tear her throat out. She clamped her mouth shut. She swallowed it. She pushed it down into the dark pit of her stomach where she kept her fear.

"Mirage," she said aloud. Her voice was flat. "Visual distortion caused by heat. Negligible."

She turned around. Jax and Gubbins were watching her from the sled, their faces masks of pity.

Sadie marched back down the slope. She picked up the cable.

"Wrong coordinates," she lied. "Thought I saw a shortcut. Let's move."

"Put me down."

The voice was weak, but it had the unmistakable rasp of command.

They stopped. Sadie looked back.

Torque had his eyes open. He was staring up at the violet sky. The bio-fluid leaking from his chest had turned black, staining the white polymer of the sled.

"We aren't stopping," Sadie said, tightening her grip on the cable. "We're losing daylight."

"Treasurer," Torque wheezed. "Do the math."

He tried to lift his mechanical arm, but the servo whined and died. He let it drop.

"I weigh four hundred pounds," Torque said. "You weigh... what? A buck twenty? You are burning three times the calories dragging me. You are drinking twice the water."

He coughed, a wet, rattling sound.

"Cut the straps," Torque said. "Leave me a canteen. I'll hold the rear. If anything follows us... I still have one grenade in my belt."

"No," Sadie said instantly.

"It's logic," Torque argued. "I'm dead weight. Literally. If you drag me into that..." He nodded toward the horizon, where the violet storm of the Bleeding Canyon was raging. "...I'll just die there. Let me die here. In the quiet."

"I said no!" Sadie screamed. She spun around, looming over the dying Warlord.

"We are a party!" she shouted. "Do you understand? You don't drop party members just because their DPS drops! You carry them to the healer! That is the mechanic!"

"There is no healer, Sadie!" Jax yelled, stepping between them. "Look at him! He’s rotting! We’re dragging a corpse!"

"He is not a corpse until his HP hits zero!" Sadie slammed her hand against the sled. "And since I can't see the bar, I’m assuming he has one hit point left! And as long as he has one, we carry him!"

She glared at them. Her eyes were manic, fever-bright. She looked terrifying. Not because she was strong, but because she was broken in a way that made her dangerous.

"I am the Treasurer," she hissed. "I manage the assets. Torque is an asset. We do not liquidate assets for a loss. Now pick up the damn rope."

Torque looked at her. He saw the desperation. He saw the denial.

He sighed, a sound like a tire deflating.

"Stubborn rat," he whispered.

"Pick it up, Jax," Sadie ordered.

Jax looked at Torque. Torque gave a microscopic nod. *Humor her.*

Jax picked up the cable.

The air changed first.

They were two miles from the Canyon now. The red dust was thinning, replaced by a strange, violet sand that sparkled in the twilight.

The wind wasn't blowing. It was vibrating.

HUMMMMMMMM.

Sadie felt it in her teeth. The hair on her arms stood up.

"Zone boundary," she muttered. "Entering high-level area."

Ahead of them, a wall of distortion shimmered. It looked like a heat wave, but it was purple. Rocks floating in mid-air, drifting lazily as if gravity had forgotten them.

"Sadie," Gubbins whispered, hiding behind Jax. "That’s not weather. That’s... that’s code. Broken code."

"It’s just a storm," Sadie said. She pulled her coat tighter. "We push through. Head down. Momentum."

She walked toward the wall of distortion.

"Sadie, wait!" Jax warned.

"I’m walking!"

She stepped into the violet haze.

It didn't feel like wind. It felt like a punch.

BAM.

Sadie flew backward ten feet. She hit the sand hard, rolling over.

Blood gushed from her nose. Her ears popped.

"Sadie!" Jax dropped the sled and ran to her.

Sadie sat up, wiping the blood away. She looked at the invisible wall.

"Knockback," she muttered, dazed. "Area of effect repulsion field."

"It rejected you," Gubbins said, his voice trembling. "It’s not a door, Sadie. It’s a wall. The magic is too dense. We can't just walk in."

Sadie stood up. Her legs were shaking. She spat blood into the violet sand.

"We can't stop," she said. "If we stop, we think. If we think, we realize we're crazy."

She looked at the wall. It pulsed.

"We camp here," she decided. "We camp on the edge. Tomorrow... tomorrow we figure out the password."

They made camp in the lee of a floating boulder.

It was unnerving. The rock, the size of a car, hung six feet off the ground, casting a shadow in the moonlight. Jax slept with one eye open, watching it, waiting for gravity to remember its job.

Sadie sat apart from them. She had her back to the fire.

She unwrapped the rags from her wrist.

The copper wire she had wrapped around the Soulbound Treasury was glowing. It was red hot.

It was melting.

Sadie watched as the copper turned to liquid and dripped off the iron band, hissing as it hit the sand.

The crack in the Ruby gem was still there. It was wider.

The "fix" hadn't worked. Physics hadn't stopped the magic.

Sadie stared at the gem. The red light inside was dim, like a dying ember.

"Thorne," she whispered.

Silence.

"Stop being dramatic," she hissed at the stone. "I wrapped it. I fixed it. You're fine."

The gem didn't pulse. It didn't answer.

Sadie touched the crack. It burned her finger.

"You're fine," she repeated, her voice trembling. "We're all fine. The System is just... rebooting. It’s a long patch. That’s all."

She pulled her sleeve down, covering the band. Covering the failure.

She lay down in the sand, closing her eyes against the violet glow of the horizon.

"It’s just a patch," she whispered into the dark.

She waited for the notification chime. She waited for the comfort of the data.

But there was only the wind, and the sound of the copper wire cooling in the dirt, twisted and useless.

Chapter 6

The sun rose over the Bleeding Canyon, but it didn't bring light. It brought a headache.

The sky to the east was a bruised purple, the color of a monitor that had been smashed. The light that filtered down wasn't warm; it was radioactive, casting long, vibrating shadows across the sand.

Sadie Miller sat cross-legged in the dirt, her back to the swirling violet storm. She was busy.

In her lap lay the guts of the white polymer sled panel. She had ripped the wiring harness out of the navigation console and was currently twisting two frayed ends of copper together with bloody fingertips.

"Signal booster," she muttered, her eyes wide and unblinking. "It’s just a range issue. The System servers are orbital. If the *Sovereign* crashed, the local relay is down. I just need to ping the satellite."

"Sadie," Gubbins whispered. The gnome was huddled near the dying fire, clutching a piece of scrap metal like a teddy bear. "There is no satellite. The sky is wrong. Look at the clouds. They aren't moving right."

"Wind shear," Sadie snapped, stripping a wire with her teeth. She tasted copper and dust. "Don't be superstitious, Gubbins. It’s tech. It’s always tech. We just need a handshake protocol."

She jammed the wires into a cracked battery pack she’d salvaged.

SPARK.

A tiny blue arc jumped.

"See?" Sadie grinned. It was a terrifying expression—too wide, too desperate. "Power. If I can amplify the frequency, I can get the HUD back. I can check Torque’s health bar. I can buy water."

She looked over at Torque. The Warlord was silent now. Too silent. His chest barely moved. The flies were starting to gather around the black fluid

leaking from his ports.

"I just need a signal," Sadie whispered, twisting the wire harder until it cut into her skin. "Come on. Connect. Please connect."

She held the makeshift antenna up to the sky. She closed her eyes, waiting for the familiar *ping* in her auditory cortex.

Searching... Searching...

She imagined the text. She willed it into existence.

But there was only the wind. A low, moaning sound that rushed out of the canyon like the breath of a dying god.

SCREEE-CHHH.

The sound cut through the morning air like a knife on a chalkboard.

Sadie’s eyes snapped open. She dropped the antenna.

"Static," she whispered. "Did you hear that? It’s audio interference. The signal is close!"

Jax stood up, gripping his rusted pipe. He was looking at the dunes to the north, where the violet haze of the canyon spilled out into the desert.

"That wasn't static, Sadie," Jax said, his voice low. "That was a growl."

"It’s a glitch," Sadie insisted, scrambling to her feet. "Audio file corruption. The zone boundary is fuzzy. It’s looping a sound effect."

She took a step toward the canyon.

"Sadie, get back!" Gubbins squeaked, pointing a shaking finger.

Movement.

In the violet haze, shapes were shifting. They didn't walk. They stuttered.

Three figures emerged from the mist. They looked like coyotes, but they were wrong. Their fur was a texture map that hadn't loaded correctly—stretched and pixelated in some places, raw meat in others. One of them had

an extra leg growing out of its spine, thrashing uselessly. Their eyes were glowing white orbs of pure, unrendered light.

Glitch-Mobs.

Sadie’s heart hammered against her ribs.

"Mobs," she said, relief flooding her chest. "Low-level scavengers. Probably Level 3 or 4. Aggro range is small."

She did the math instantly. *Three targets. Light armor. Melee class.*

"I’ll handle this," Sadie said. She stepped in front of Jax.

"Sadie, you don't have a weapon!" Jax hissed.

"I don't need one," Sadie said confidently. "I have **[Stealth]**. If I break line of sight and lower my stance, the agro resets. Basic mechanics."

The lead coyote—a monstrosity with its jaw unhinged and hanging by a thread of sinew—locked its glowing eyes on her. It let out a sound that was half-bark, half-dial-up modem screech.

KKK-RRRR-ZZZT.

It lowered its head to charge.

Sadie didn't run. She didn't scream.

She dropped into a crouch. She held her breath. She made herself small, perfectly executing the motion that, for five years, had turned her invisible to the System’s AI.

Activate Stealth.

She waited for the grey filter to slide over her vision. She waited for the icon to appear in the corner of her eye: **[Hidden]**.

She waited to become a ghost.

The coyote didn't stop. It didn't look confused.

It looked right at her.

Sadie crouched in the sand, visible, vulnerable, and completely insane.

"Why isn't it working?" she whispered. "I'm crouched. I'm quiet."

The coyote's muscles bunched. The texture of its fur rippled like bad water.

"Sadie!" Jax roared. "Move!"

It was too late.

The beast launched itself. It crossed the twenty feet in a blur of motion that skipped frames. One second it was there, the next it was airborne.

Sadie instinctively reached for her inventory. Her hand swiped the air, trying to grab the **[Dagger of Venom]** she used to keep in slot 4.

Her fingers closed on nothing but wind.

CRUNCH.

The coyote hit her.

It wasn't a game impact. There was no knockback animation. There was just weight. Hot, heavy, stinking weight.

The creature slammed her into the red dirt. Its claws tore through her thin coat like paper.

Sadie opened her mouth to scream, but the air was knocked out of her.

Then the teeth came down.

The coyote bit her left forearm.

Sadie expected a damage number. She expected a red flash. She expected a health bar to drop by 15%.

Instead, she felt the teeth meet in the middle of her muscle.

AAAAAGH!

The pain was blinding. It was white-hot and absolute. It wasn't a notification. It was her nerves firing a warning that she was being

disassembled.

Warm blood sprayed across her face. Her blood.

"Get off!" she screamed, thrashing wildly. She punched the creature in the nose, but her fist had no **[Strength]** modifier. It bounced off the bone harmlessly.

The coyote shook its head, tearing the wound wider. Sadie felt a tendon snap.

"Help!" she shrieked. "Where is the dagger? Inventory! Open inventory!"

She clawed at the empty air above the beast's head, trying to summon a menu that would save her.

"Inventory!" she sobbed. "Please!"

The second coyote circled, looking for an opening at her throat.

Then the sky went dark.

WHAM.

A rusted iron pipe slammed into the attacking coyote's ribs.

The sound was wet and dull—metal on meat.

The creature yelped, a sound of corrupted audio, and released Sadie's arm. It scrambled back, its spine twisted at an unnatural angle.

Jax stood over her.

He didn't look like a hero. He didn't have his glowing tower shield. He didn't have his golden armor.

He looked like a terrified man in a dirty t-shirt holding a piece of scrap metal.

"Get back!" Jax roared. He swung the pipe again.

The second coyote lunged. Jax didn't use a skill. He didn't have a cooldown. He just panicked. He swung the pipe in a wild, clumsy arc.

THWACK.

He caught the beast in the jaw. Bone shattered. The coyote spun away, collapsing into a heap of twitching polygons.

The third coyote looked at its pack mates. It looked at the large man with the pipe. It hissed—a sound of static—and dissolved into the violet mist, retreating back into the canyon.

Jax didn't chase it. He dropped to his knees, his chest heaving. He dropped the pipe. His hands were shaking so hard he couldn't make a fist.

"Sadie," he gasped. "Sadie."

Sadie lay in the sand. She was clutching her arm.

The blood was bright red against the purple dust. It was pumping. A steady, rhythmic spurt.

"My arm," she whispered. She stared at it. "It... it bit me."

Gubbins was there instantly. He ripped a strip of cloth from his jumpsuit. His small hands were trembling as he wrapped the wound.

"Pressure," Gubbins mumbled, his face pale. "Need pressure. Tie it off."

He pulled the knot tight. Sadie screamed again, her vision swimming.

"It hurts," she sobbed. "Jax... why does it hurt so much?"

Jax looked down at her. His eyes were wide, filled with a horror Sadie had never seen before. In the System days, he had seen her take dragon fire and walk away. He had seen her fall from buildings.

But he had never seen her broken.

"Because it’s real, Sadie," Jax whispered. "It’s real."

Sadie looked at the dead coyote.

The corpse wasn't despawning. There was no loot bag. It was just a pile of meat and fur, bleeding violet sludge into the sand.

She looked at her own blood soaking through the rag.

The realization hit her harder than the beast had.

There was no UI. There was no inventory. There was no Stealth.

She had crouched in the open and let a monster eat her because she thought she was playing a game.

"I'm not..." Sadie choked on the words. Tears mixed with the blood on her face. "I'm not the Treasurer."

She looked at Jax.

"I'm just meat," she whispered.

Jax reached out and took her good hand. He squeezed it. His grip was warm, rough, and human.

"We're all meat now, Sadie," he said softly. "That’s why we have to fight."

Sadie closed her eyes. The pain in her arm throbbed, a relentless, pounding reminder that the safety net was gone. The rug had been pulled. The floor was gone.

She was falling. And this time, there was no bottom.

Chapter 7

The blood didn't stop. That was the problem with reality—it didn't have a cooldown on bleeding.

Sadie stumbled, her boots scuffing through the violet dust. Her left arm was a heavy, throbbing mass of agony wrapped in Gubbins' grease-stained shirt. Every time her heart beat, a fresh wave of fire washed up her shoulder, making her vision swim.

"Sadie," Gubbins whispered, trotting beside her. "You're pale. Like... really pale. We need to stop. We need to burn it shut."

"No fire," Sadie rasped. Her tongue felt swollen. "Fire draws the mobs. We keep moving."

Behind them, the sound of the sled dragging over the rocks was a constant, grinding rhythm. *Scrape. Thud. Scrape.* Jax was pulling Torque alone now, his breath coming in ragged, wet gasps. The big man hadn't complained once, but Sadie could see the tremors in his arms. He was running on fumes.

They were walking through a graveyard of physics.

The landscape here, on the lip of the **Bleeding Canyon**, was broken. Boulders floated knee-high off the ground, drifting lazily in the wind. Patches of sand rippled like water. The air smelled of ozone and copper—the scent of a thunderstorm trapped in a bottle.

"Just a little further," Sadie lied. She didn't know where they were going. She just knew they couldn't stay where the Glitch-Coyotes hunted.

They entered a narrow ravine. The walls rose high on either side, composed of strata that glowed with a faint, sickly purple light. Shadows stretched long and thin, defying the position of the sun.

CLICK.

The sound was small. Mechanical. Precise.

Sadie froze. She knew that sound. It wasn't a glitch. It was the safety catch of a heavy crossbow being disengaged.

"Drop it," a voice echoed from the rocks above. "Drop the pipe, big man. Or I put a bolt through your knee."

Jax hesitated. He tightened his grip on the rusted iron pipe, his eyes scanning the rim of the ravine.

"Don't," Sadie whispered. "Jax. Don't."

Movement rippled through the shadows. Figures detached themselves from the rock walls.

There were twelve of them.

They didn't look like the Dust-Nomads. Those people wore leather and cloth to survive the sun. These people wore armor made of garbage.

One man had a breastplate fashioned from smashed computer server racks. Another wore a helmet made from the skull of a Glitch-Beast, the third eye-socket gaping open. They were gaunt, their skin grey and flaky, their eyes wide and feverish.

They held crossbows made of bone and elastic cable, aiming down at the party with shaky, desperate hands.

"Hands!" the voice screeched. "Let me see the digits!"

Sadie slowly raised her good hand. She winced as she lifted her injured arm.

A man slid down a pile of scree to stand in front of them.

He was tall, barely more than a skeleton wrapped in pale skin. He wore a long coat made of stitched-together parchment—old maps, or maybe old character sheets. Around his neck hung a necklace of severed fingers, dried and yellow like old jerky.

He twitched. His head jerked to the left, then snapped back, as if he were trying to dodge an invisible fly.

"Well, well," the man said. His voice was a dry rattle, like dice in a cup. "What do we have here? New players? Or just... lag?"

He stepped closer, sniffing the air. He smelled Sadie. He smelled the blood.

"My name is **Rictus**," the man said, grinning. His teeth had been filed into sharp points. "And you look like you've been de-leveled."

Sadie tried to stand tall, but the blood loss made the world tilt. "We're just passing through," she said, trying to summon the Treasurer's icy tone. "We have no loot. We were robbed by Nomads."

"Robbed?" Rictus laughed. He spun around, spreading his arms to his crew. "She says she was robbed! As if she had anything to take!"

He turned back to her, his eyes narrowing. They were the color of dirty ice.

"I know that look," Rictus whispered, leaning in close. "The twitch in the eye. The way you tap your fingers on your thigh, waiting for a menu. You're suffering from Withdrawal, aren't you, girl? You miss the blue light. You miss the numbers telling you that you matter."

He tapped his own temple.

"I was a Level 80 Necromancer," Rictus said softly. "I had an army of the dead. I had a castle in the Void. And now? Now I'm just a hungry man in a dirt ditch."

He reached out.

"Don't touch her," Jax growled, stepping forward.

THWACK.

A bolt hit the dirt an inch from Jax's foot.

"Easy, Tank," Rictus giggled. "You're out of mana. You have no aggro here."

Rictus grabbed Sadie's left arm. He squeezed the wound.

Sadie screamed, her knees buckling. The pain was blinding white.

"Quiet," Rictus hissed. He ripped the bloody rag away.

He didn't look at the bite mark. He looked at the wrist.

He saw the iron band. He saw the dull Amber gem. The matte black Obsidian gem.

And the cracked, pulsing Ruby gem.

Rictus froze. His twitching stopped. His eyes went wide, reflecting the faint red light of the dying stone.

"Oh," Rictus breathed. "Oh, my. Look at that."

He ran a jagged fingernail over the iron.

"A Container," he whispered. "A Soul-Vessel. And it’s full."

He looked up at Sadie. His expression had changed. It wasn't mockery anymore. It was hunger. Pure, starving hunger.

"You're carrying a banquet on your wrist, girl."

"It’s empty," Sadie lied, trying to pull away. "The magic is gone. It’s just scrap iron."

"Liar," Rictus grinned. He leaned down, putting his ear to the band. "I can hear them. They're screaming. They're dying. That one..." He tapped the Ruby gem. "...that one tastes like rage. Like spicy, red pepper rage."

He licked his lips.

Sadie felt a cold knot of horror form in her stomach.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"We are the **Stat-Eaters**," Rictus announced, gesturing to his ragged crew. "We figured it out. The System didn't leave. It just... sublimated. It turned into gas. Into energy."

He pointed to the violet storm raging in the canyon.

"And sometimes, it gets trapped in things. In glitches. In monsters. In... items."

He looked at the Treasury band with reverence.

"If we eat the flesh of the glitch, we get a little buzz. A little XP. But if we drink the soul of an artifact..." Rictus shivered. "That’s a level-up, darling. That’s a permanent buff."

"They aren't food," Sadie said, her voice shaking. "They're people. They're spirits."

"They're XP," Rictus corrected. "And I am very, very under-leveled."

He snapped his fingers.

"Bag them."

The cultists surged forward.

"No!" Jax roared. He swung the pipe, aiming for Rictus’s head.

Rictus didn't dodge. He didn't have to.

THWACK.

A crossbow bolt caught Jax in the thigh.

The big man grunted, his leg buckling. He went down to one knee. Another bolt hit his shoulder. He dropped the pipe.

"Jax!" Sadie screamed.

"Don't kill him!" Rictus ordered. "Meat spoils if you kill it too fast. We need them fresh for the extraction."

Rough hands grabbed Sadie. They twisted her injured arm behind her back. She cried out, tears blinding her.

Gubbins was kicked to the ground. A cultist sat on him, tying his hands with wire.

Sadie watched helplessly as they swarmed the sled. They looked at Torque.

"This one looks expired," a cultist shouted, kicking the Warlord.

"Check the engine," Rictus called out. "If the core is still warm, bring him. Cyborg parts have residual mana."

Sadie was hauled to her feet. Rictus stood in front of her, smiling. He reached out and stroked the iron band on her wrist.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "I won't break it. I have a machine for that. A lovely little extractor I built from the old server parts. It cracks the shell and sucks out the juice without spilling a drop."

He leaned close, his breath smelling of rotten meat.

"We're going to have a feast tonight, Treasurer."

"You're insane," Sadie spat.

"I'm adapting," Rictus winked. "Welcome to the grind."

He turned and walked away, his coat of maps flapping in the toxic wind.

"Move them out!"

Sadie was shoved forward. She stumbled, forced to walk at crossbow-point. She looked back at Jax, who was limping, blood running down his leg. She looked at Torque, unconscious on the sled, being dragged by fanatics who saw him as a battery, not a man.

She looked at the violet storm ahead. The **Bleeding Canyon**.

They were going into the glitch. But not as explorers.

As lunch.

Chapter 8

The walk into the **Bleeding Canyon** wasn't a journey; it was a descent into a fever dream.

Sadie stumbled, her bare feet sinking into sand that felt wrong. It wasn't just soft; it was viscous, like walking through dry syrup. The color had shifted from the rusty red of the frontiers to a bruising, violent violet that seemed to absorb the light.

"Keep moving, XP bags," a cultist shouted, shoving the barrel of a bone-crossbow into Sadie’s spine.

She pitched forward, catching herself on her good hand. Her left arm, wrapped in the bloody rag, throbbed with a dull, sickening rhythm that matched the pulsing of the sky above.

"Jax," she rasped, looking back.

The big man was ten paces behind her, dragging the polymer sled with Torque’s unconscious body. Jax was limping heavily. The bolt in his thigh had snapped off, leaving the shaft buried in the muscle, but he hadn't made a sound. His face was a mask of grey sweat and grim determination. He looked less like a warrior and more like a draft horse being worked to death.

"I'm... good," Jax grunted, though his voice was thin. "Just... walking."

Sadie looked at the canyon walls rising around them. They weren't rock. They were strata of compressed data—layers of stone that flickered and twitched. One second, the cliff face was granite; the next, it was a wireframe grid of neon blue lines; then, it was raw, bleeding meat.

ZZZ-T.

A sound like a blown speaker echoed off the walls.

"Don't look at the walls," Rictus called out from the front of the column. He walked with a bouncing, manic stride, his coat of stitched maps flapping in

the static wind. "The textures are loose here. If you stare too long, your optic nerve tries to render the void. Brain hemorrhage. Messy."

He giggled, adjusting the necklace of severed fingers around his neck.

"And we need your brains intact. The flavor is in the fear."

Sadie kept her eyes on the ground. The physics of the place were breaking down. Pebbles floated at waist height. Dust didn't settle; it drifted in spirals, ignoring the wind.

It felt like walking inside a computer that was in the process of crashing.

"Sadie," Gubbins whispered. The gnome was tied to Sadie by a length of rough rope. His hands were bound behind his back, and he was stumbling, his eyes squeezed shut. "I feel sick. My inner ear... it doesn't know which way is down."

"Focus on my boots," Sadie said, then remembered she didn't have boots. "Focus on my heels. Just watch my feet, Gubbins. One step. Two steps."

She forced herself to breathe. The air tasted of ozone and copper pennies. Every breath felt like inhaling static electricity.

The iron band on her wrist was getting hotter.

They reached a pinch point in the canyon where the reality corruption was absolute.

The path ahead didn't just curve; it clipped.

A massive section of the canyon floor was missing, replaced by a swirling void of checkerboard patterns—black and purple squares that stretched down into infinity. Floating above this void were islands of rock that flickered in and out of existence.

"Geometry error," Gubbins gagged, retching dryly. "Oh god, the geometry..."

"Halt!" Rictus raised a skeletal hand.

The column stopped. The cultists looked nervous. Even Rictus seemed to treat this with a degree of caution.

"The **Glitch-Field**," Rictus announced, turning to face his prisoners. "The System tried to delete this sector, but it got stuck at 99%. Now? It’s a shredder."

He pointed to a rock floating near the edge. As they watched, the rock drifted into the checkerboard void. It didn't fall. It stretched. The stone elongated like taffy, turning into a long, thin string of grey pixels before vanishing with a wet *pop*.

"Physics doesn't apply in the gap," Rictus smiled. "If you step off the path, you don't die. You just... stretch. Forever."

He looked at Jax. He looked at the heavy sled with Torque.

"This is a weight check," Rictus said, tapping his chin. "The floating platforms are stable, but they have a load limit. If you're too heavy... *pop*."

He pointed to the first platform—a slab of granite hovering over the abyss.

"You first, Tank."

Jax looked at the gap. It was five feet. Doable for a jump. But he was dragging four hundred pounds of dying Warlord.

"I can't jump with the sled," Jax growled. "I have a hole in my leg."

"Then crawl," Rictus shrugged. "Or throw the Orc into the hole. He’s dead weight anyway."

Jax looked at Torque. The Warlord’s chest was barely moving.

"No," Jax said.

"Then move!" Rictus shouted, leveling his crossbow. "Cross the gap! Prove your STR stat is real!"

Jax gritted his teeth. He wrapped the sled cable around his waist. He stepped to the edge of the void.

The checkerboard pattern swirled below, dizzying and wrong. It pulled at the eyes.

Jax didn't jump. He stepped.

He slammed his good foot onto the floating rock.

THRUM.

The rock sank six inches under his weight, emitting a low, bass note. It wobbled, threatening to tip him into the nothingness.

"Balance!" Sadie screamed. "Jax, center of gravity!"

Jax roared, heaving the sled. The polymer sheet scraped over the edge, landing on the floating rock with a crash. The rock dipped dangerously low. The void licked at the edges of the sled.

Jax scrambled. He clawed at the stone, dragging himself and Torque to the other side of the platform. He lunged for the solid ground on the far side of the gap.

He grabbed the ledge.

The floating rock behind him tilted. The sled began to slide backward toward the checkerboard abyss.

"No!" Sadie lunged against her rope, but the cultist held her back.

Jax felt the drag. He didn't let go. He dug his fingers into the dirt of the far ledge. He screamed, the veins in his neck bulging like steel cables. It wasn't a skill. It wasn't **[Heroic Heave]**. It was just terrified, desperate muscle.

He pulled.

The sled scraped, caught on the lip, and then—with a final, agonizing yank—slid onto solid ground.

Jax collapsed, gasping, face down in the violet dust.

"Very good!" Rictus clapped slowly, a dry, rattling sound. "A primitive display, but effective. See? Fear is the best buff."

He turned to Sadie.

"Your turn, Treasurer. Try not to trip."

The deeper they went, the heavier the Treasury became.

It started as a dull ache in Sadie's shoulder, like carrying a heavy purse. But within an hour, it felt like she was dragging an anvil.

Her left arm hung uselessly at her side, the muscles straining. The iron band felt dense, as if the souls inside were condensing into lead.

"Walk faster!" a cultist shoved her.

Sadie stumbled, falling to her knees. Her hand hit the dirt, and she cried out as the weight of the band drove her wrist into the sharp rocks.

"I... I can't," Sadie gasped. "It's too heavy."

Rictus walked back to her. He loomed over her, blocking out the toxic sun.

"Heavy?" He crouched down, inspecting the band. The crack in the Ruby gem was pulsing with a frantic, staccato rhythm.

Thump-thump-thump.

"Ah," Rictus whispered. "They know. They know where we are going."

He reached out and tapped the iron.

"Souls have weight, girl. Did you know that? In the System, they were data. Weightless. But here? In the Glitch? Reality is trying to interpret them. It sees three massive, legendary spirits crammed into a tiny ring, and it's applying the physics of mass."

He grinned, his filed teeth flashing.

"They are terrified. They are getting heavier because they are trying to anchor themselves. They don't want to go into the machine."

"You're hurting them," Sadie spat, trying to lift her arm. It wouldn't budge. It felt glued to the ground.

"Pain validates existence," Rictus philosophized. He stood up. "Get up. If you can't lift it, drag it. If you drag it, you bleed. I don't care. Just move."

Sadie gritted her teeth. She grabbed her left wrist with her right hand. She pulled.

It took everything she had. She lifted her arm inches off the ground, her back screaming in protest.

She stood up, swaying.

"That’s the spirit," Rictus laughed. "Carry your burden."

They reached a dead end.

Or what looked like one.

The canyon narrowed into a bottleneck blocked by a swirling vortex of symbols. It wasn't a rockfall. It was a **Code-Wall**.

Symbols—runes, numbers, fragments of C++—spun in a tight, clockwise spiral, blocking the path. It hissed like a nest of snakes.

"A firewall," Gubbins whispered, staring at it. "An Admin-Lock. The System put it here to quarantine the glitch."

"Correct!" Rictus beamed. "A remnant of the old security protocols. Nasty business. Touches you, melts your skin off."

He grabbed Gubbins by the collar of his jumpsuit and hauled him to the front.

"You," Rictus said. "The Gnome. You smell like machine oil and fear. You were an Engineer class, yes?"

"I... I was," Gubbins stammered. "Level 40. **[Technomancy]** spec."

"Good specs," Rictus nodded. He shoved Gubbins toward the vortex. "Open it."

"I can't!" Gubbins wailed. "I don't have the interface! I can't hack it without a console!"

"Improvise," Rictus said coldly. He drew a jagged knife and held it to Sadie’s throat.

"You have two minutes," Rictus said casually. "Or I open *her* throat and we see if the spirits like the taste of arterial spray."

"No!" Gubbins shrieked. He turned to the vortex.

He stared at the spinning code. His goggles reflected the chaos.

"Think, Gubbins, think," the gnome muttered, wringing his hands. "It’s not magic. It’s logic. It’s a sequence."

He watched the symbols.

0... 1... Alpha... Null...

It looked random. But Gubbins had spent twenty years staring at code. He rubbed his eyes. Without the System to highlight the pattern, he had to use his brain. His wet, squishy, panic-filled brain.

"There's a repeater," Gubbins whispered. "Every seventh rotation. The 'Null' symbol lags by half a second."

"One minute!" Rictus sang out, pressing the knife into Sadie’s skin. A bead of blood welled up.

"I need to interrupt the flow!" Gubbins looked around frantically. "I need a chaotic variable!"

He saw a rock on the ground. A violet, glitch-stone that vibrated slightly.

"Sadie, duck!" Gubbins yelled.

He grabbed the rock and threw it. Not at the center, but at the edge of the spiral, timed perfectly with the lag he had seen.

The rock hit the 'Null' symbol.

KZRT-POP.

The vortex stuttered. The code flashed red, then collapsed. The swirling wall of symbols dissolved into a shower of harmless sparks.

The path was open.

Gubbins fell to his knees, sobbing. "I did it. I did it."

"Manual override," Rictus mused, looking impressed. "Crude. Violent. I like it."

He sheathed the knife. He patted Sadie on the cheek, smearing the drop of blood.

"Your pets are talented, Treasurer. Let's hope they taste as good as they work."

The camp of the Stat-Eaters was not a camp. It was a festering wound in the side of the world.

Nestled in a wide amphitheater of the canyon, it was built from the refuse of the System. Tents made of scavenged server foil. Bonfires burning with motherboard components that released green, toxic smoke.

In the center of the camp was a pit.

It was a natural fissure in the ground, about twenty feet across. Inside, a pool of raw, liquid magic boiled. It was violet, thick, and luminous.

Above the pit hung a cage.

It was made of rebar and bone, suspended by a rusted crane chain.

"Home sweet home," Rictus sighed, breathing in the toxic fumes.

The cultists cheered—a ragged, hungry sound. They dragged the prisoners through the mud.

"Put them in the larder," Rictus ordered, pointing to the cage.

Sadie fought. She kicked and bit, but she was exhausted. They threw her into the cage. Jax was thrown in next, crashing heavily onto the metal bars. Then Gubbins.

Finally, they hoisted Torque’s sled. They tipped it over. The dying Warlord tumbled into the cage with a sickening thud.

CLANG.

The door was slammed shut and locked with a heavy padlock.

Rictus stood on the edge of the pit, looking up at them.

"Rest now," he called out. "Marinate in the ambiance. The extraction begins at moonrise."

He walked away, toward a large tent where a massive, terrifying machine made of glass tubes and drills sat waiting.

Sadie crawled to the edge of the cage. She looked down through the bars.

Thirty feet below, the raw magic bubbled. It hissed and popped.

It was the same energy Valerius had said could re-forge the band. The same energy that could save Thorne.

But now, it wasn't a forge. It was a cooking pot.

"We're trapped," Gubbins whispered, curling into a ball. "We're going to be eaten."

Sadie looked at the iron band on her wrist. It was vibrating so hard her arm was numb. The Ruby gem was dark, silent, and terrified.

She gripped the bars of the cage.

"Not yet," she whispered.

She looked at the machine Rictus was prepping. She looked at the pit.

"We're in the right place," Sadie said, a dangerous light entering her eyes. "This is the forge. We just have to survive the hammer."

Chapter 9

The cage swayed.

It was a sickening, lurching motion, like a pendulum swinging over the mouth of hell. Thirty feet below, the raw magic of the **Bleeding Canyon** bubbled and popped, casting a nauseating violet light up through the rusted floor grate.

Sadie Miller lay flat on her stomach, her boots hooked around a bar, her hands gripping the strap of Torque's sled.

"Don't move," she hissed. "Nobody move."

The cage was a rusted birdhouse made of rebar and scrap metal, suspended by a single, groaning chain from a crane arm on the cliff edge. It wasn't built for four people. It certainly wasn't built for a four-hundred-pound cyborg Warlord.

Every time Torque shifted in his fever dreams, the cage tilted. The rusty floor squealed. Dust poured down into the pit, sizzling as it hit the magic soup below.

"He's sliding," Gubbins whimpered. The gnome was clinging to the ceiling bars like a frightened monkey, his eyes squeezed shut. "Sadie, the floor is bent! He's going to slide right out the gap!"

"He's not sliding," Sadie grunted, wrapping the leather strap around her bleeding wrist. "Because I've got him."

Jax sat in the corner, his back pressed against the bars. His leg—the one with the crossbow bolt snap-off in the thigh—was stretched out stiffly. His face was a mask of grey sweat.

"Let him go, Sadie," Jax whispered. "If he shifts again, the chain snaps. We all drop."

"I don't drop assets," Sadie snapped, though her voice lacked its usual bite. It was thin, frayed by exhaustion. "We hold. Rictus wants us for moonrise.

That gives us... two hours. Maybe three."

She looked down at her left arm. The **Soulbound Treasury** was dull and heavy. The Ruby gem was dark.

She couldn't summon Thorne to cut the bars. She couldn't summon Valerius to shield them. She couldn't summon Kaelen to pick the lock.

She was just a girl holding a rope, trying to keep a dead man from falling into a vat of acid.

RUMBLE.

The sound didn't come from the pit. It came from the walls.

Sadie looked up.

The cliff face above them—the jagged, glitching strata of the canyon—was vibrating. The violet veins in the rock pulsed.

"Tremor," Gubbins squeaked. "Code-shift! The geometry is resetting!"

"Brace!" Sadie screamed.

She didn't have time to do anything else.

The canyon wall buckled. It didn't crumble like normal rock; it pixelated. A massive section of the cliff turned into a wireframe grid, then solidified instantly into a new shape—a jagged spur of granite that thrust outward.

It hit the crane arm.

CRUNCH.

The metal screeched. The crane bent. The chain dropped five feet.

The cage went into freefall.

Sadie’s stomach hit her throat. For one terrified second, she was weightless.

CLANG.

The chain caught.

The impact was bone-shattering. The cage slammed into the side of the cliff, bouncing off the rock.

Sadie was thrown across the floor. She slammed into the bars, the breath driven from her lungs.

"Jax!"

A scream tore through the cage.

It was Jax.

The impact had buckled the side of the cage. A heavy, rusted iron girder—part of the structural frame—had bent inward.

It had collapsed directly onto Jax’s good leg.

"My leg!" Jax roared, thrashing. "Get it off! Get it off!"

The cage tilted wildly. The weight shift was catastrophic. With the girder bent and Jax pinned in the corner, the center of gravity had moved. The floor was now slanted at a forty-five-degree angle toward the open pit.

Torque’s sled began to slide.

"Gubbins! Grab the strap!" Sadie yelled, lunging for the Warlord.

She caught the edge of the sled just as it tipped over the gap in the floor. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase on the polymer. She locked her elbows, her boots sliding on the rusted grate.

"I can't reach him!" Gubbins wailed, dangling from the ceiling.

"Jax!" Sadie screamed. "Help me!"

Jax gritted his teeth. He tried to push himself up, but the girder was crushing his shin against the floor. He roared, pushing against the iron with his massive arms.

It didn't move.

"I'm pinned!" Jax gasped, his eyes wide with panic. "Sadie, I'm pinned! The cage... it’s going to flip!"

He was right. The chain above groaned, a high-pitched whine of metal pushed past its yield point. The cage was twisting. If Jax didn't move his weight to the center, the chain would shear.

"I have to move!" Jax yelled. "Sadie, lift it!"

Sadie looked at the girder. It was a solid beam of industrial steel, bent by the force of a tectonic shift. It weighed at least three hundred pounds. And it was under tension.

"I can't," Sadie whispered. "I'm Level 0. I have 8 Strength."

"Try!" Jax screamed.

Sadie looked at the pit below. The violet bubbles were popping, releasing toxic gas.

She looked at Torque, sliding inch by inch toward death.

She looked at Jax, the tank who had taken a bullet for her, now trapped like a rat.

She let go of Torque’s sled.

"Gubbins!" she shouted. "Catch him!"

The gnome dropped from the ceiling, landing on the sled. He grabbed the bars, using his small body as a chock block. It wasn't much, but it stopped the slide.

Sadie scrambled up the tilted floor to Jax.

She grabbed the girder. She pulled.

Nothing. It was like pulling on the mountain itself.

"It’s too heavy," she gasped.

"Use a lever!" Gubbins yelled from below. "Physics, Sadie! Force multiplier!"

Sadie looked around frantically. The cage was bare. Just rust and...

A loose bar.

On the ceiling, a section of rebar had snapped during the impact. It hung down, jagged and sharp.

Sadie jumped. She grabbed the bar. She hung her weight on it, twisting back and forth.

"Come on!" she screamed.

SNAP.

The rusty metal gave way. She fell to the floor, clutching a three-foot length of jagged iron.

She jammed the bar under the bent girder, wedging it against the floor grate to create a fulcrum.

"On three," Sadie panted, wiping blood from her eyes. "Jax, when I push, you pull. You pull like you have cooldowns."

"I don't have cooldowns," Jax wheezed. "I just have pain."

"Then use the pain!"

Sadie grabbed the end of her makeshift lever. She placed her boots against the wall for leverage.

She looked at her hands. They were small. Scared. The hands of a girl who used to pay people to lift things for her.

She looked at the Treasury band on her wrist. It was cold. Dead.

I am the hammer, she thought. *I am the hammer.*

"One," Sadie whispered.

The chain above groaned.

"Two."

Jax braced his hands on the floor.

"Three!"

Sadie threw herself backward. She put every ounce of her body weight, every shred of her frustration, every jagged piece of her fear into the pull.

CREAAAAK.

The girder moved. An inch.

"Push!" Jax roared.

"AAAAAGH!" Sadie screamed.

It wasn't a battle cry. It was a sound of tearing.

She felt the muscles in her shoulders pop. She felt the skin on her palms rip open against the rough iron. A blood vessel in her nose burst, sending a hot stream down her lip.

She wasn't using magic. She wasn't using a skill. She was using biology. And biology had limits.

Her vision went white. The pain in her back was blinding.

Just... lift.

She forced her legs to straighten. She forced her spine to lock.

The lever bent. The girder groaned.

It lifted. Four inches. Six inches.

"Go!" Sadie shrieked, blood spraying from her mouth. "Move your leg!"

Jax scrambled. He dragged his crushed shin out from under the beam. He rolled to the center of the cage.

Sadie let go.

CLANG.

The girder slammed back down, shaking the entire cage.

Sadie collapsed. She hit the floor hard, gasping for air. Her arms were trembling so violently they blurred. Her hands were raw meat.

Silence fell over the cage.

The chain stopped groaning. With Jax in the center, the weight redistributed. The cage leveled out.

Torque’s sled stopped sliding.

Sadie lay on the grate, staring at the violet sky through the bars. Her chest heaved. She tasted iron.

"You..."

She turned her head.

Jax was staring at her. He was clutching his mangled leg, but his eyes were fixed on Sadie.

He looked at the heavy iron girder. He looked at the bent piece of rebar Sadie had used. He looked at her bleeding hands.

"You lifted it," Jax whispered.

"Leverage," Sadie wheezed. "Simple physics."

Jax shook his head slowly.

"That wasn't physics, Sadie," he said. "That was... impossible. You don't have the stats for that."

"I don't need stats," Sadie spat blood onto the grate. She pushed herself up to a sitting position. She wiped her face with her sleeve. "I need my tank to be mobile."

She crawled over to him. She ripped another strip from her coat—it was barely a coat anymore, just a collection of rags—and began to bind his crushed leg.

Jax watched her. He didn't wince as she tightened the knot.

"I thought you were a caster," Jax said softly. "Back in the city. I thought you were just a squishy money-mage."

He reached out and touched her shoulder. His hand was heavy, respectful.

"I was wrong," Jax said. "You're a grinder."

Gubbins crawled up from the bottom of the cage. He looked at the girder, then at Sadie.

"Boss," the gnome whispered. "You bent the rebar."

Sadie looked at the lever lying on the floor. It was curved into a 'U' shape from the force she had applied.

She looked at her wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was glowing.

Not brightly. Not with magic. But with heat.

The iron band was smoking slightly, as if it had been held in a fire. The Ruby gem—Thorne's cracked stone—was pulsing. A slow, deep, rhythmic throb.

Thump... Thump... Thump.

It wasn't the frantic vibration of the glitch. It was a heartbeat.

"He felt it," Sadie realized. "Thorne. He felt the struggle."

She touched the band. It was warm. Comforting.

"Durability check," Sadie whispered to the stone. "Passed."

Below them, on the edge of the pit, slow clapping echoed.

Sadie dragged herself to the bars and looked down.

Rictus stood there, looking up. He was smiling. But it wasn't his usual mocking grin. It was something sharper.

"Well done!" the Necromancer called out, his voice echoing off the canyon walls. "Very visceral! No magic! Just sweat and tears!"

He pointed a long, skeletal finger at her.

"The flavor profile is changing, Treasurer! You taste less like fear now..."

He licked his lips.

"...and more like iron."

Sadie stared down at him. She didn't flinch. She grabbed the bent rebar lever and held it tight.

"Come up here and taste this," she whispered, too quiet for him to hear.

But Rictus seemed to understand. He laughed, turning back to his machine.

"Soon, darling! Soon!"

Sadie sat back against the bars. Her body was broken. Her hands were ruined. She had no gold, no levels, and no hope.

But she had Jax. She had Gubbins. And she had a bent piece of iron.

She looked at Jax. He nodded.

It wasn't a salute. It was an acknowledgement.

She hadn't bought his loyalty. She hadn't hired him.

She had earned him.

Chapter 10

The machine below them didn't sound like an engine. It sounded like a dentist’s drill hitting a nerve.

Suspended thirty feet in the air, the rusted cage swayed gently in the toxic thermals of the **Bleeding Canyon**. Sadie Miller gripped the cold iron bars, her knuckles white, looking down at the nightmare unfolding in the amphitheater.

It wasn't a camp. It was a slaughterhouse.

The Stat-Eaters moved with the jerky, twitching efficiency of addicts. They dragged crates of scavenged tech—old server blades, monitors, miles of copper wire—and piled them around the central pit. But the centerpiece was the **Extractor**.

It was a monstrosity. A towering structure of glass tubes, spinning centrifuges, and jagged obsidian needles, all powered by a throbbing generator that leaked black smoke. It looked like someone had tried to build a gaming PC out of torture devices.

"Look at the intake valves," Gubbins whispered, peeking through the floor grate. "They're using Soul-Siphons. Illegal tech. Banned by the Guild in version 2.0."

"They aren't banning anything anymore," Jax grunted, shifting his crushed leg. He was pale, sweating through his shirt. "Rictus is the GM now."

Sadie watched as two cultists dragged a struggling shape toward the machine. It was a Glitch-Wolf—a creature of muscle and static, its fur flickering in and out of existence. It howled, a sound that tore at the ears like corrupted audio.

"Watch," Rictus’s voice boomed from below. He stood on a platform overlooking the machine, his coat of maps flapping. "Observe the harvest!"

The cultists threw the wolf onto a metal slab. Clamps snapped shut, pinning its limbs. The creature thrashed, snapping its jaws, but the machine hummed louder.

WHIRRRRR.

A massive, needle-tipped piston descended. It didn't pierce the wolf’s heart. It pierced its skull.

The wolf stiffened. It didn't bleed red. It bled light.

A stream of thick, violet luminescence was sucked up through the glass tubes. It swirled through the centrifuges, separating into distinct colors—blue for mana, red for health, yellow for stamina.

The wolf didn't die immediately. It shriveled. Its body desiccated, turning grey and flaky, like old paper left in the sun. Its eyes went dark. Then, with a soft *puff*, it disintegrated into a pile of ash.

"Deleted," Sadie whispered.

The machine hissed. A single vial of glowing purple liquid dropped into a collection tray.

Rictus picked it up. He held it to the light, swirling the contents.

"Vintage," he crowed. "Level 15. A bit gamey, but potent."

He uncorked the vial and tipped his head back. He drank it in one long, shuddering gulp.

The effect was immediate.

Rictus arched his back. His grey, flaky skin flushed with color. The veins in his neck bulged, glowing blue. He stood taller, his twitching stopping instantly. For a terrifying second, he looked like a hero—strong, vibrant, overflowing with power.

[Buff Applied: Artificial Level Up]

Sadie couldn't see the text, but she felt the pressure. The air around Rictus crackled. He laughed, a sound of pure, chemical euphoria.

"I can feel the code!" Rictus screamed at the sky. "I can see the wireframe! I am the Admin!"

"He’s high," Jax said, disgusted. "He’s getting high on XP."

"He’s eating their souls," Sadie said, clutching the iron band on her wrist. The crack in the Ruby gem throbbed, a terrified heartbeat against her skin. "And we're the main course."

Rictus didn't use the ladder to reach them.

He jumped.

Powered by the stolen essence of the glitch, he leaped thirty feet into the air, landing lightly on the roof of their cage. The metal groaned under the impact.

Sadie backed away from the ceiling, shielding Torque’s unconscious body.

Rictus hung upside down, peering through the bars like a bat. His eyes were glowing with the violet light of the potion.

"Did you enjoy the show, Treasurer?" Rictus asked. His voice was smooth now, the dry rattle gone. "It’s a bit messy, I admit. But progress always requires a little... debugging."

"You're a cannibal," Sadie spat.

"Cannibal?" Rictus chuckled. He reached a hand through the bars, his fingers dancing in the air. "No, no. Cannibals eat meat. I eat *potential*."

He flipped right-side up, hovering outside the bars, levitating on a cushion of raw magic.

"The System didn't leave, Sadie," Rictus explained, his eyes wide and manic. "It shattered. It’s in the air. In the dirt. In the monsters. It’s just... uncompiled code. Orphaned data."

He gestured to his crew below.

"We are the garbage collectors. We gather the fragments. We compile them. And when I have enough... when I have eaten enough..."

He leaned in close, his face pressed against the rusted bars.

"...I will reboot the world. And I will be the one holding the keyboard."

"You're just an addict," Sadie said, her voice shaking. "You're chasing a high that doesn't exist anymore."

Rictus's smile faltered. The violet light in his eyes dimmed slightly. A twitch returned to his left eyelid.

"Maybe," he whispered. "But the withdrawal is hell, darling. Absolute hell."

He looked at the iron band on her wrist. The hunger returned, sharp and sudden.

"And you have the cure."

Rictus pointed a long, skeletal finger at the **Soulbound Treasury**.

"I've run the appraisal," he said softly. "I know what you have in there."

He tapped the bars in rhythm.

"Valerius. The Paladin. Taste like vanilla and righteousness. High defense buff. Good for the bones."

He tapped again.

"Kaelen. The Rogue. Bitter. Sharp. Taste like cold iron and shadows. Good for the reflexes."

He paused, his eyes locking onto the cracked Ruby gem.

"And Thorne. The Berserker."

Rictus licked his lips. A drop of violet saliva ran down his chin.

"Rage," Rictus whispered. "Pure, undistilled, Pre-War Rage. That is a rare vintage, Sadie. Do you know what rage does to a Stat-Eater? It stabilizes the core. It stops the twitching. It makes you... permanent."

Sadie covered the band with her hand. "Don't you say his name."

"I’m going to drink him first," Rictus promised. "I’m going to crack that little ruby egg and suck him dry. And you..."

He looked at Sadie with cold amusement.

"...you get to watch. You get to see your 'family' become fuel. It’s poetic, really. The Treasurer liquidated."

"If you touch him," Sadie said, her voice low and dangerous, "I will kill you."

Rictus laughed. It was the laugh of a god looking at an insect.

"With what stats?" he asked. "You're Level 0. You have 8 Strength. You're just a wrapper, Sadie. And I'm about to peel you."

He floated away, descending back to the ground.

"Prep the machine!" Rictus roared to his cultists. "Purge the lines! I want a clean extraction at moonrise!"

Sadie slumped against the bars. She looked at the band. The Ruby gem was dark. Silent.

He knows, she thought. *Thorne knows he’s coming.*

The gem didn't pulse. It felt dead.

"He’s not going to drink him," Sadie whispered. "I won't let him."

"How?" Jax asked. He was sitting with his back to the wall, holding his crushed leg. "Sadie... look at him. He’s flying. He’s glowing. We’re in a cage."

Sadie looked down at the machine. Rictus was shouting orders.

Suddenly, a pipe on the side of the Extractor burst.

HISSS.

A jet of violet steam shot out. A cultist standing nearby screamed as the steam hit his arm. His skin bubbled and turned into grey pixels.

Rictus didn't help him. He just backhanded the man and turned a valve, shutting off the leak.

"Stabilize the pressure!" Rictus screamed. "It’s running hot!"

Sadie watched. Her eyes narrowed.

"Gubbins," she said. "Did you see that?"

The gnome crawled over. "The pressure valve? Yeah. The manifold is cracked. He’s overclocking it. He’s trying to suck too much juice too fast."

"It’s unstable," Sadie realized.

"It’s a bomb," Gubbins corrected. "If the intake gets clogged... or if it tries to process something too dense... the feedback loop would be catastrophic."

Sadie looked at the iron band. She looked at the crack in the Ruby gem.

"Too dense," she whispered.

Rictus wanted rage. He wanted the heavy, dense soul of a Berserker.

"He thinks Thorne is a potion," Sadie said softly. "He thinks he can just drink it."

She touched the cold iron.

"He forgot one thing," Sadie said. "Thorne isn't a liquid. He’s a solid. He’s a sword."

She looked at Gubbins.

"If we shove a sword into a blender... what happens to the blender?"

Gubbins blinked. A slow, terrified grin spread across his dirty face.

"The engine seizes," Gubbins whispered. "And then... boom."

The sun began to set. The shadows in the canyon grew long and jagged.

The violet light of the pit grew brighter, illuminating the cage from below with a hellish glow.

"Moonrise in ten minutes!" Rictus shouted.

The crane arm groaned.

CLANK.

The chain jerked. The cage began to lower.

Slowly. Inch by inch. Down toward the bubbling pit. Down toward the machine.

Sadie crawled to the center of the cage. She gathered them. Jax. Gubbins. Even the unconscious Torque.

"Listen to me," Sadie whispered. "When that door opens, it’s going to be chaos. Rictus is going to go for the band. He’s going to put me in the chair."

"Sadie, no," Jax growled, reaching for his rusted pipe.

"Let him," Sadie said.

Jax froze. "What?"

"Let him put me in the chair," Sadie said. Her eyes were hard, flinty. "Let him hook me up. Let him turn it on."

"He’ll kill you!" Gubbins cried.

"He’ll try to extract Thorne," Sadie said. "But Thorne is broken. He’s leaking. He’s unstable."

She looked at the cracked gem.

"I’m not going to fight Rictus," Sadie said. "I’m going to feed him."

She grabbed Jax’s hand. She grabbed Gubbins’ hand. She placed her hand on Torque’s chest.

"When the machine starts... when it starts to scream... you cover your heads. You get Torque behind the shielding. Because I’m going to overload it."

"With what?" Jax asked. "You don't have mana."

Sadie looked at the Treasury.

"With Resonance," she said. "Valerius said we need raw magic to re-forge the band. Rictus has a whole tank of it."

She tightened the strap of her coat.

"I’m going to short-circuit his godhood."

The cage hit the ground with a heavy thud.

CLANG.

The door rattled.

Rictus stood there, bathed in violet light, his filed teeth gleaming.

"Dinner time, Treasurer," he purred.

Sadie stood up. She didn't cower. She didn't beg.

She walked to the door.

"I hope you're hungry, Rictus," Sadie said.

She stepped out into the slaughterhouse.

"Because this meal bites back."

Chapter 11

The metal chair was cold, wet, and smelled of copper.

It sat in the center of the amphitheater, bolted to the rock with rusty industrial rivets. Above it, the **Extractor** loomed like a praying mantis made of glass and jagged steel, its needles dripping with the violet sludge of processed souls.

"Sit," Rictus ordered.

Two cultists shoved Sadie forward. She stumbled, her bare feet slipping on the slick stone floor. They grabbed her arms—one gripping her wounded left forearm so hard she saw stars—and slammed her into the seat.

Leather straps were tightened across her chest. Metal clamps snapped around her ankles. Her left wrist, bearing the **Soulbound Treasury**, was strapped into a specialized cradle. A heavy, magnifying lens swung down, positioning itself directly over the Ruby gem.

"Comfortable?" Rictus asked, leaning over her. His breath smelled of ozone and rot. "The ergonomics are a bit... Version 1.0, I admit. But it gets the job done."

Sadie pulled against the restraints. The iron band was heavy, dead weight.

"You don't know what you're doing," she rasped. "You think it’s just energy. It’s a consciousness, Rictus. If you drill into that gem, you aren't tapping a keg. You're poking a bear."

"I like bears," Rictus smiled, checking the pressure valves on the machine. "They have such... texture."

He turned a dial. The machine hummed to life.

VRRR-THUM.

The sound vibrated through the chair, shaking Sadie’s teeth. The glass tubes began to glow with a hungry, sucking light.

"Let’s start with the Berserker," Rictus narrated for his audience of fanatics. "High density. High volatility. We need to crack the shell before we can get to the yolk."

He reached for a lever that controlled a diamond-tipped drill bit hovering inches above Sadie’s wrist.

"Stop!" Jax roared.

The big man had been thrown to the ground near the pit, guarded by three men with crossbows. But seeing the drill descend, Jax moved.

He didn't use a skill. He used momentum.

He surged up from his knees, ramming his shoulder into the nearest cultist. The man crumpled, breath wheezing out of him. Jax grabbed the man’s crossbow, swung it like a club, and shattered the jaw of the second guard.

"Get off her!" Jax screamed, limping toward the machine.

"Jax, no!" Sadie yelled. "Stay back!"

Rictus didn't even look up from the console. He waved a dismissive hand.

"Suppress the tank," he yawned.

A bolt took Jax in the shoulder. He grunted, stumbling, but he didn't fall. He swung the crossbow stock, cracking a cultist’s ribs.

"For the Treasurer!" Jax bellowed.

He was ten feet away. He was going to make it.

Then a cultist stepped out of the shadows. He was huge, wearing armor made of car doors. He swung a sledgehammer.

CRACK.

The hammer hit Jax in the chest.

It wasn't a heroic tanking moment. There was no damage mitigation. There was just the sickening sound of ribs snapping.

Jax flew backward. He hit the dirt hard and didn't get up. He wheezed, pink froth bubbling on his lips.

"Jax!" Sadie screamed. She struggled against the straps, tearing the skin on her wrists.

Rictus tsked. "So much wasted HP. Should have stayed in the party formation, big guy."

He looked back at Sadie. The drill began to spin. A high-pitched whine filled the air.

"Now," Rictus whispered. "Open wide."

The drill descended.

Sadie stared at the spinning needle. It was going to pierce the Ruby gem. It was going to kill Thorne.

She didn't think. She didn't calculate.

She screamed.

"Thorne!"

It wasn't a command. It was a plea. She poured every ounce of her fear, her rage, and her desperation into the cold iron band. She didn't have mana to give him. She didn't have gold to bribe him.

She just had blood.

The crack in the Ruby gem flared.

It wasn't the warm, orange glow of a campfire. It was the blinding, jagged white light of a welding torch.

KRA-KOOM.

The shockwave hit the machine. The glass tubes shattered. Rictus was thrown backward, skidding across the stone floor.

The leather straps holding Sadie’s left arm disintegrated into ash.

"Yes!" Gubbins cheered from where he was tied up. "Get him, Thorne! Smash him!"

But Sadie didn't cheer.

She screamed.

The heat on her wrist was unbearable. It felt like she had stuck her hand into a reactor core. The iron band wasn't just hot; it was melting into her skin.

And the thing emerging from the gem wasn't Thorne.

It was a horror.

A cloud of red static erupted from the band. It swirled and coalesced, forming a towering shape ten feet tall. It had the outline of a man—broad shoulders, a horned helmet, a massive greatsword—but the details were wrong.

His texture was stretching. His face was a blur of pixels that screamed in binary code. His sword wasn't steel; it was a jagged tear in reality that hissed like a severed power line.

"ERROR," the thing roared. The voice sounded like two trains colliding. **"BETRAYAL. COLD. DARK."**

"Thorne?" Sadie whimpered, clutching her burning wrist.

The spirit didn't look at her. He thrashed blindly, swinging the glitch-sword in a massive, chaotic arc.

The blade hit the Extractor machine.

SCREEEEEE.

Metal screamed as the sword phased through the steel frame, dissolving it into grey dust. The machine collapsed, sparking wildly.

"Fascinating," Rictus whispered, wiping blood from his lip. He stood up, eyes wide with hunger. "Look at the corruption! It’s beautiful!"

Thorne spun around. He didn't know friend from foe. He was trapped in a loop of his own death—the memory of being sealed away, alone and angry.

He saw a cultist.

"ENEMY," the glitch roared.

Thorne lunged. He slammed a fist made of red static into the man.

The cultist exploded. Not into gore, but into data. He vanished.

But at the exact moment of impact, Sadie’s head snapped back.

WHAM.

It felt like she had been hit by a truck.

"Aaaagh!" Sadie shrieked, doubling over in the chair. Blood poured from her nose. Her ribs—the same ribs Thorne would have used to brace the impact—felt like they were being crushed by a vice.

"Sadie!" Gubbins yelled. "What’s happening?"

"Feedback!" Sadie gasped, spitting blood. "The bond... it’s not filtered! I feel it! I feel everything he hits!"

In the old System, the bond was a one-way street. Sadie paid mana; Thorne took the damage. The System acted as a firewall, protecting the user from the trauma of the weapon.

Now, the firewall was gone.

Thorne swung again, hitting a stone pillar.

CRACK.

Sadie’s right arm—her good arm—snapped audibly.

She wailed, a high, thin sound of pure agony. She slumped in the chair, her vision going white.

"Stop!" she begged. "Thorne! Stop! You're killing me!"

The spirit didn't hear her. He was lost in the noise. He roared again, raising the glitch-sword high. He was aiming for Rictus.

But Rictus was smiling.

"Yes!" the Stat-Eater shouted, spreading his arms. "Pour it out! Bleed for me, Treasurer! The pain gives it flavor!"

Rictus didn't dodge. He wanted Thorne to hit him. He pulled a new, reinforced collection vial from his coat. He was going to catch the essence as it leaked.

Thorne brought the sword down.

Sadie saw it coming. She knew the impact would kill Rictus.

But she also knew the recoil would liquefy her brain.

"Dismiss!" Sadie screamed. She grabbed the burning iron band with her broken hand. "Thorne! Stand down! That is an order!"

It didn't work. The command codes were dead.

Thorne’s sword was inches from Rictus’s skull.

Sadie did the only thing she could think of. She didn't use a command. She used the truth.

"Thorne, you're hurting me!"

The red static froze.

The giant, glitching face turned toward her. For a second, the pixelated blur resolved into two burning, sorrowful eyes.

"SADIE?" The voice was small. Terrified.

He saw her blood. He saw her broken arm.

"NO. NO PAIN. PROTECT."

The spirit recoiled. He didn't fade gently. He imploded.

The red static sucked back into the Ruby gem with the force of a vacuum.

FWUMP.

Sadie was thrown against the restraints. The heat vanished from her wrist instantly, replaced by a bone-deep cold.

Thorne was gone.

The Extractor machine was a smoking ruin. The cultist was gone.

Rictus stood there, untouched. He looked at the empty air where the sword had been. He looked at the vial in his hand—empty.

He looked disappointed.

"Premature," Rictus sighed. "You pulled him back just before the climax."

Sadie hung limp in the chair. Her right arm hung at a wrong angle. Her nose was broken. Her chest heaved with shallow, rattling breaths.

She looked at the Treasury band. The crack in the Ruby gem was wider now. A dark, lifeless grey was creeping into the red stone.

"He felt it," Sadie whispered. Tears cut tracks through the blood on her face. "He felt me break."

Rictus walked over to her. He inspected her broken arm with clinical detachment.

"The resonance is toxic," Rictus observed. "Without the System to buffer the connection, you are literally sharing a nervous system with a ghost. If he fights, you bleed. If he dies..."

Rictus tapped the band.

"...you die."

He signaled to his surviving men.

"Reset the machine. We need a new intake valve. And patch up the girl."

He leaned in close to Sadie’s face.

"We can't have the vessel leaking before the main event."

Sadie couldn't move. She looked past Rictus, to where Jax lay in the dirt, unconscious. To where Torque lay in the cage, slowly dying.

She had tried to use her power. And it had almost killed her.

I can't wield them, she thought, the darkness closing in. *I can't fight with them. I'm not their master anymore.*

She was their victim.

"Next time," Rictus whispered, "don't hold back. I want to see what happens when you both break together."

He walked away, leaving Sadie strapped to the chair, broken, bleeding, and terrified of the very thing she had come to save.

Chapter 12

The air in the amphitheater had grown thick and stagnant, tasting of ozone and the copper tang of Sadie's own blood.

She hung limp in the chair, her head lolling to the side. The metal restraints felt like ice against her skin, a cruel contrast to the feverish heat still radiating from the **Soulbound Treasury** on her left wrist. Her right arm—the one that had snapped when Thorne's phantom blow hit the pillar—pulsed with a dull, nauseating rhythm. It was a physical weight, a useless limb that anchored her to the reality of her own fragility.

She was Level 0. She was a broken girl in a rusted chair.

Around her, the Stat-Eaters were shadows moving through the violet haze of the pit. They were shouting, their voices distorted by the static wind, as they tried to salvage the wreckage of the **Extractor**. Rictus was somewhere in the smoke, his laughter occasional and shrill, sounding more like a mechanical glitch than a human sound.

"Sadie..."

The whisper was so soft she thought she was hallucinating. A small, soot-covered shape moved in the corner of her vision.

Gubbins.

The gnome was crawling on his belly, his hands free but his movements jerky and terrified. He reached the base of the chair and looked up at her, his goggles cracked and smeared with grease.

"I found a blade," he whispered, holding up a jagged shard of glass. "I cut the rope. Jax is... he's breathing, but he won't wake up."

Gubbins looked at her right arm, which hung at a sickening angle. He made a soft, whimpering sound in the back of his throat. He reached into his jumpsuit and pulled out a flat piece of polymer and a strip of dirty cloth.

"I have to move the bone," Gubbins said, his voice trembling. "It’s going to hurt, boss. It’s going to hurt bad."

"Do it," Sadie rasped. She bit her lip until it bled, bracing herself.

CRACK-POP.

The world turned white for a second. Sadie’s muffled scream died in her throat as Gubbins lashed the polymer to her arm, creating a crude splint. She slumped back, cold sweat drenching her shirt.

"Torque is... he's gray, Sadie," Gubbins whispered, his eyes wide behind the glass. "The Golem-Drive is clicking. Like an empty gas tank. If we don't get the stabilizer fluid in the next ten minutes, his heart is just going to stop."

"We can't get it," Sadie said, her voice hollow. "The machine is broken. The gold is gone. We’re just waiting for the moon."

Gubbins reached into his pocket and pulled out a scorched, flickering datapad. "I found this in the debris. It’s... it’s a log. From the Architects. The ones who built the Treasury before the System was ever a thing."

Sadie looked at the screen. It was filled with ancient schematics—lines of light that didn't look like code, but like nervous systems.

"It’s called a **Resonance Dive**," Gubbins said, his finger tracing a diagram of a soul merged with a human mind. "Thorne isn't just broken, Sadie. He’s stuck. He’s reliving the Sealing. He thinks he’s back in the war, being turned into a tool. That’s why he’s lashing out. He can't see us. He only sees the enemy."

The gnome looked at her, his expression a mix of awe and terror.

"The log says a Wielder can enter the gem. You can go inside his head. If you find the core of the trauma—the 'Shatter Point'—and hold it together, the iron will re-forge. The band will stop leaking."

Sadie looked at the cracked Ruby gem. The dark grey rot was still spreading, devouring the red light.

"What’s the catch, Gubbins?"

"The catch is the feedback," Gubbins whispered. "You're in his mind, but your body is still here. If he feels pain in the memory, you feel it here. If you can't convince him you're a friend... he'll kill you in the dream. And if you die in there, your brain just... shuts off. Permanent logout."

Sadie let out a dry, jagged laugh. "I'm already at 1 HP, Gubbins. What's a little more risk?"

"There's more," the gnome said, his voice dropping. "Rictus is coming back. He's not going to use the machine. He's going to do it manually."

As if on cue, the smoke parted.

Rictus stepped out of the haze. He was glowing—a sickly, vibrant violet that seemed to hum beneath his skin. He had drunk another vial. His movements were too fast, his eyes darting with a predatory, over-clocked intensity. In his hand, he held a long, obsidian needle.

"The Extractor is a blunt instrument," Rictus purred, stepping onto the platform. He shoved Gubbins aside with a casual flick of his wrist, sending the gnome tumbling into the dirt.

Rictus loomed over Sadie, the needle glinting in the light of the pit.

"I realized I was being too clinical," Rictus said, his voice a vibrating hiss. "The soul is like a fruit. Sometimes you don't need a press. You just need to pierce the skin and drink."

He raised the needle, aiming it directly at the crack in the Ruby gem.

"Wait," Sadie said.

Rictus paused, his head tilting like a bird's. "Wait? For what? The moon is high, Treasurer. The audit is due."

"You want the Berserker," Sadie said, her heart hammering against her ribs. "But he's fractured. If you stick that needle in now, the essence will be bitter. It'll be corrupted by the glitch. It won't give you a level-up. It'll give you a system crash."

Rictus’s eyes narrowed. The violet light in his pupils flickered. "You're stalling."

"I'm offering a trade," Sadie said. "I can prime him. I can open the gate. The **Resonance Dive**. I’ll stabilize the core from the inside. He’ll be pure. Undistilled rage. The kind of XP that could make you an Admin."

Rictus stared at her. The hunger in his face was a physical thing, a void that could never be filled.

"And what do you want in exchange?"

"Let them go," Sadie nodded toward Jax and the cage where Torque lay. "Give them the stabilizer fluid. Let them walk out of this canyon. You get me. You get the spirits. You get the ship."

Rictus looked at the dying Warlord, then back at the glowing iron band. To him, Jax and Torque were just scrap. But the Treasury... the Treasury was godhood.

"A settlement," Rictus grinned, his filed teeth flashing. "Very well. I’ll feed your Orc. I’ll let your Tank limp away. But the moment you enter that gem, Sadie... I’m going to be right here. With my straw."

He stepped back, lowering the needle.

"Prime the vessel, Treasurer. I’m thirsty."

Sadie looked at Gubbins. The gnome was staring at her with tears in his eyes.

"Sadie, don't," he whispered.

"Get Torque to the fluid," Sadie ordered. "Jax! Get him out of here!"

She didn't wait for an answer. She closed her eyes. She focused all of her will on the cold, heavy iron on her wrist. She didn't look for a menu. She didn't look for a button.

She looked for the pain.

She reached out with her mind, touching the jagged white crack in the Ruby gem.

"Thorne," she thought. **"It’s Sadie. I’m coming in."**

The world didn't vanish. It shattered.

The sound of the pit, the smell of the ozone, the sight of Rictus’s greedy face—it all dissolved into a roar of red static. The physical pain in her broken arm didn't go away; it changed. It became a cold, crushing weight, as if she were being buried under a mountain of iron.

She felt her consciousness being stretched, pulled through a needle-thin gap in reality.

FALLING.

She wasn't Level 0 anymore. She wasn't anything.

She was just a spark of awareness in a sea of blood-red clouds.

The static cleared.

Sadie stood on a battlefield. The sky was the color of a fresh bruise. Below her, the ground was littered with the broken remains of a thousand iron soldiers. The air was filled with the sound of screaming and the rhythmic, terrifying beat of a drum made of skin.

In the center of the field stood a man.

He was huge, his armor charred and broken. He held a greatsword that was taller than Sadie, its blade notched and dripping with black ichor. He wasn't moving. He was staring at a wall of white mist that was slowly closing in on him.

"THE END," a voice boomed, shaking the ground. **"THE SILENCE IS HERE."**

Thorne raised his sword, his muscles corded like iron cables. He looked like a god of war, but his eyes... his eyes were filled with the same terror Sadie had felt in the dark of the *Golden Sovereign*.

"Thorne!" Sadie shouted.

The giant didn't turn. He didn't hear her. He was trapped in the loop.

Sadie took a step forward. The ground beneath her feet felt like glass. She looked at her right arm. In this world, it wasn't splinted. It was glowing red, the bone visible through the skin, pulsing with the same rhythm as the cracks in the gem.

The trauma was the map.

"I have to find the Shatter Point," she whispered to herself.

Behind her, she felt a sharp, stinging sensation in her neck. Back in the real world, Rictus had just touched the needle to the band.

The clock was ticking.

Sadie started to run toward the Berserker, her feet leaving bloody prints on the iron soil.

Chapter 13

The sky was the color of a fresh bruise—purple, black, and bleeding around the edges.

Sadie stood on a plain of glass. It wasn't smooth; it was shattered, millions of shards reflecting a burning red sun that never moved. Under her feet, the glass crunched like dry bones. The air smelled of ozone and old, dried blood.

She looked down at herself.

She was wearing her old Treasurer's coat—the one she had worn in the Upper City, before the crash. But it was tattered, full of holes. Her hands were translucent, fading at the fingertips.

"Hello?" she called out.

Her voice didn't echo. The sound fell flat, absorbed by the infinite emptiness of the plain.

ROAR.

The sound hit her like a physical wave. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

The ground shook. A crack appeared in the glass floor, spiderwebbing toward the horizon.

Out of the red mist, a figure emerged.

He was a mountain of iron and rage. **Thorne.**

But this wasn't the glowing red spirit she knew. This was a man. He stood ten feet tall, clad in armor that looked like it had been chewed by dragons. His helmet was horned, the metal twisted and scarred. In his hands, he held a greatsword that was less a weapon and more a slab of broken architecture.

He wasn't looking at Sadie. He was looking at the horizon.

From the mist, they came.

The Silencers.

Legions of them. Faceless soldiers made of liquid gold. They had no eyes, no mouths, just smooth, blank surfaces that reflected Thorne's own terrified face back at him. They moved in perfect, synchronized silence, their golden spears lowered.

"GET BACK!" Thorne bellowed.

He swung the greatsword. The air screamed as the blade clove through the front rank of the golden army. The Silencers shattered into coins—thousands of gold coins that rained down on the glass plain.

But for every one he destroyed, two more took its place.

They swarmed him. They didn't strike to kill. They struck to bind. They threw golden chains over his arms. They hooked his legs with pikes.

"I AM NOT PROPERTY!" Thorne screamed, thrashing against the weight. **"I AM A MAN! I HAVE A NAME!"**

Sadie ran toward him. "Thorne! It's a loop! It's not real!"

He didn't hear her. He couldn't hear her. He was trapped in the moment of his death, playing it out on infinite repeat.

The chains tightened. Thorne fell to one knee, the glass cracking beneath his weight.

Sadie reached out to touch him, but a shockwave of red energy blasted her back. She tumbled across the shards, cutting her translucent skin.

She lay there, gasping, watching as the golden soldiers buried him. They weren't fighting a war. They were conducting an audit. They were filing him away.

Then, the sky tore open.

It wasn't a cloud break. It was a rip in the fabric of the dream.

A hand descended.

It was immense, made of ink and parchment, the fingers long and spindly like quill pens. It reached down from the bruised heavens, ignoring the army, ignoring the battle.

It pinched Thorne by the scruff of his neck.

The Berserker, the Titan of the Iron Frontiers, looked small in its grip.

"ASSET ACQUIRED," a voice boomed from the sky. It sounded familiar. It sounded like **Silas Vane**. It sounded like **Elara**.

It sounded like **Sadie**.

Thorne stopped fighting. He went limp. The rage drained out of him, replaced by a hollow, crushing despair.

"Just a tool," Thorne whispered. The words were heavy, falling from his lips like stones. **"Just... inventory."**

The hand squeezed. Thorne was compressed. His armor folded, his body twisted, until he was nothing but a red light trapped in a gemstone.

The hand withdrew, leaving the battlefield empty.

Sadie lay on the glass, trembling.

She recognized the hand. She recognized the gesture.

Every time she had opened her inventory... every time she had summoned him to smash a wall or block a hit... she had been that hand.

"I did that," Sadie whispered.

She looked at her own hands. They were trembling.

"I told myself we were partners," she said to the silence. "But I never asked him what he wanted. I just checked his durability and put him back in the box."

She was no better than Rictus. No better than the Guild. She was just a user with a nicer smile.

She curled into a ball on the broken glass. The shame was colder than the desert night.

CRACK.

A bolt of black lightning struck the glass plain.

Sadie jumped.

The sky was bleeding.

Giant, obsidian needles were piercing the red clouds. They looked like oil derricks, stabbing down into the memory.

RICTUS.

In the real world, the Stat-Eater was tapping the gem. In the dream world, he was fracking the soul.

The needles pulsed. They began to suck the color out of the world. The red mist turned grey. The golden soldiers turned to ash.

Thorne reappeared in the center of the plain. He was on his knees, clutching his chest. He looked faded. Translucent.

"COLD," Thorne moaned. **"SO COLD."**

Sadie felt it too. A draining sensation in her chest. Her breath misted in the air. Her vision blurred.

"He’s drinking us," Sadie realized. "He’s drinking the memory."

She stood up. Her legs felt heavy, like she was wading through mercury.

She looked at Thorne. He was fading fast. The edges of his armor were dissolving into grey smoke.

"Thorne!" Sadie yelled.

He didn't move. He was resigned. He was waiting for the end.

Sadie looked at the giant needle looming over him. It was pulsing, drawing the essence up into the sky.

She looked around for a weapon. There was nothing but broken glass.

She looked at herself. Level 0. No strength. No magic.

But she wasn't inventory. And neither was he.

Sadie ran.

She didn't run away. She ran toward the needle.

The loop reset.

The golden soldiers reappeared, rising from the ash. They ignored the giant needles in the sky. They marched toward the fading Thorne, intent on binding him again.

Thorne didn't lift his sword. He was too weak. He just bowed his head.

"TAKE IT," he whispered. **"TAKE THE HATE. IT IS TOO HEAVY."**

A golden soldier raised a spear, aiming for Thorne’s heart.

Sadie slid across the glass.

She didn't have a shield. She didn't have a skill.

She threw her body in front of the spear.

THWACK.

The golden tip hit her shoulder.

It didn't pierce her—she was a foreign object in the memory—but the impact threw her backward. She hit Thorne’s armored leg hard.

"Get up!" Sadie screamed, scrambling to her feet.

Thorne blinked. He looked down.

He saw a small, grey ghost of a girl standing between him and the army. She was bleeding. She was trembling. But she had picked up a shard of glass and was pointing it at the legion.

"LITTLE GHOST?" Thorne rumbled. His voice was confused. **"RUN. YOU ARE NOT... PART OF THE DATA."**

"I'm not data!" Sadie yelled, slashing at a soldier who got too close. The glass passed through the golden armor, but the intent—the sheer refusal to yield—pushed the soldier back.

"I'm the tank!" Sadie shouted. "I'm drawing aggro! Get up!"

Thorne stared at her.

He saw the fear in her eyes. He saw the way her hands shook.

He saw himself.

For centuries, he had been the big, scary weapon. The thing that didn't feel fear. But inside the armor, he was just a man who had been terrified of being alone.

And here was this girl—this Level 0 Rat—standing in front of a god, holding a piece of broken glass.

"WHY?" Thorne asked. **"YOU ARE WEAK."**

"Yeah," Sadie spat, kicking a soldier in the knee. "I am weak! I am broke! I am a mess!"

She turned to look at him, tears streaming down her face.

"But I am not your owner, Thorne. I am your partner. And partners don't let partners die in a hole!"

Something shifted in the air.

The red mist swirled. The grey drain from the needles slowed.

Thorne stood up.

He didn't stand up like a machine rebooting. He stood up like a man waking from a nightmare.

He reached out a massive, armored hand. He didn't grab his sword.

He grabbed Sadie’s shoulder.

"PARTNER," Thorne repeated. The word felt strange in his mouth.

He looked at the golden soldiers. Then he looked at the obsidian needles in the sky.

"THEY ARE EATING THE HATE," Thorne realized.

"Let them choke on it," Sadie said.

She grabbed his hand. It was hot. Burning hot.

"We have to break the sky, Thorne," Sadie said, pointing up at the needle. "We have to break the loop."

Thorne looked at the sky.

He saw the crack—the fissure where Rictus was draining him.

"IT IS TOO HIGH," Thorne rumbled. **"I CANNOT JUMP."**

"We don't jump," Sadie said. "We resonate."

She stepped closer to him. She placed her hand on his chest plate, right over his heart.

"I was wrong," Sadie whispered. "I treated you like a stat stick. I thought if I just kept your durability high, you'd be happy. But durability isn't about not breaking."

She looked into his burning eyes.

"It’s about how you put yourself back together."

Thorne placed his massive hand over hers.

"I AM... TIRED, SADIE."

"Me too," Sadie said. "So let's finish this."

She closed her eyes. She stopped fighting the drain. She leaned into it. She visualized the iron band on her wrist. She visualized the crack.

And she visualized welding it shut. Not with fire. But with will.

"TOGETHER," Thorne whispered.

They screamed.

It wasn't a scream of pain. It was a scream of rejection. Rejection of the loop. Rejection of the victimhood. Rejection of the idea that they were just things to be used.

Sadie felt her mind expand. She felt Thorne's rage—hot, spicy, overwhelming—pour into her. But it didn't burn her. It filled the hollow spaces where her levels used to be.

And Thorne felt her stubbornness. Her cold, calculating, Scavenger grit. It cooled his fire, turning it from a wildfire into a forge.

In the sky, the obsidian needles shattered.

CRACK.

The red clouds swirled. The golden soldiers dissolved.

The memory began to collapse.

Sadie looked up. The crack in the sky was sealing. The grey rot was receding.

She looked at Thorne. He was fading, but not into death. He was fading into clarity. He was becoming solid.

"WAKE UP, SADIE," Thorne roared, raising his sword in salute. **"AND BRING THE HAMMER."**

Sadie smiled.

The world dissolved into white light.

Sadie opened her eyes.

The pain was instantaneous. Her broken arm screamed. Her ribs felt like ground glass. The smell of ozone and rot filled her nose.

She was back in the chair.

Rictus was standing over her, the needle pressed against the Ruby gem.

"Finally," Rictus hissed. "The shell is cracking. Give it to me."

He pressed the needle down.

But the gem didn't crack.

CLANG.

The needle hit the stone and shattered.

Rictus blinked. "What?"

He looked at the Treasury band.

The crack in the Ruby gem was gone. The stone was whole. Deep, vibrant, flawless red.

And it was glowing.

Sadie lifted her head. Her nose was bleeding. Her eye was swollen shut. But her good eye... her good eye was burning with a light that matched the gem.

"Did you get it?" Sadie whispered. Her voice was wrecked, but steady.

Rictus stepped back, fear flickering in his violet eyes. "Get what? What did you do?"

Sadie pulled against the restraints. The leather straps groaned.

"You wanted the Berserker," Sadie said.

The iron band flared. The heat was intense, radiating out in waves that distorted the air.

"You wanted the vintage."

Sadie smiled. It was a terrifying sight—blood on her teeth, fire in her eyes.

"Well," she whispered. "He’s awake."

SNAP.

The leather strap holding her left wrist didn't just break. It disintegrated.

Sadie’s arm was free.

She raised her fist. The Ruby gem pulsed—once, twice—like a heartbeat that had just been restarted with a defibrillator.

"I AM THE HAMMER," a voice boomed, not from the band, but from the air itself.

Sadie looked at Rictus.

"Run," she advised.

Chapter 14

"I AM THE HAMMER."

The voice didn't just vibrate the air; it rearranged the dust.

Sadie Miller felt the weight of the words in her marrow. She wasn't looking at a ghost anymore. The red static that had defined **Thorne** for the last hour had solidified, condensing into a mass of heavy, scarred iron.

He stood over her, a titan of war. His armor was thick, pitted with the marks of a thousand battles, glowing with the dull, angry heat of a forge cooling down. His greatsword, **The Sunderer**, rested on his shoulder—a slab of metal so heavy it should have cracked the stone floor.

Rictus scrambled backward, his boots skidding on the slick rock. The confident, preening Stat-Eater was gone, replaced by a terrified scavenger who realized he had just tried to eat a bomb.

"Kill it!" Rictus shrieked, pointing a shaking finger. "Shoot it! It’s just data! It’s just a mob!"

Three cultists raised their bone-crossbows.

Thorne turned his helmeted head. He didn't raise his shield. He didn't dodge.

TWANG.

The bolts hit his chest plate.

TINK. TINK. TINK.

They shattered on impact. Thorne didn't even flinch. He took a step forward, the ground shaking under his sabatons.

"YOU," Thorne rumbled, pointing a gauntleted finger at the cultists. **"YOU ARE IN THE WAY."**

He swung his arm. It wasn't an attack; it was a dismissal. The backhand struck the nearest cultist, lifting him off his feet and throwing him twenty feet into a pile of scrap metal.

The other two dropped their weapons and ran.

Rictus looked at the Spirit, then at Sadie, who was still strapped to the chair, her chest heaving, her eyes burning with a new, terrifying light.

"This... this isn't in the patch notes," Rictus stammered.

He turned and fled. He didn't run toward the exit; he scrambled up the scaffolding toward the **High Altar**—a reinforced platform overlooking the pit where his elite guards were waiting.

"Regroup!" Rictus screamed as he climbed. "Bring the Heavy Siphons! Drain the pit! I want enough mana to burn that thing to ash!"

Thorne watched him go. The Berserker made a low, growling sound in his throat, like a wolf denied a kill. He turned back to Sadie.

He raised his massive sword. For a second, Sadie flinched.

CLANG.

The blade came down with surgical precision, shearing through the metal clamps holding her ankles.

CLANG.

The chest strap snapped.

Sadie fell forward. Thorne caught her. His hand was hot, encompassing her entire shoulder, but his grip was gentle.

"PARTNER," Thorne rumbled. **"STATUS?"**

"Broken," Sadie wheezed. She leaned against his iron chest, her legs refusing to hold her weight. "Arm... ribs... everything."

"I CANNOT HEAL," Thorne said, his voice laced with frustration. **"I CAN ONLY BREAK."**

"Breaking is good," Sadie whispered. "Breaking gets us out."

She looked up at him. The red light in his eyes was steady now. No glitch. No madness. Just him.

"You're back."

"YOU CAME FOR ME," Thorne said simply. **"IN THE DARK."**

He looked up at the High Altar, where Rictus was shouting orders.

"NOW," Thorne said, hefting his sword. **"WE CLEAR THE ROOM."**

The adrenaline dump hit Sadie like a physical blow.

As soon as Thorne helped her to the edge of the amphitheater, behind the cover of a wrecked generator, the world started to spin. Her vision grayed out at the edges. Her right arm, splinted with plastic and rags, throbbed with a nausea-inducing rhythm.

She slid down the metal wall, hitting the dirt hard.

"Sadie!"

Gubbins was there instantly. The gnome looked like he’d been rolled in soot, his jumpsuit torn, his goggles cracked. He checked her eyes, pulling up her eyelid with a dirty thumb.

"Pupils are blown," Gubbins muttered. "Shock. Dehydration. And..." He touched her broken arm. "...pain. A lot of pain."

"I'm fine," Sadie lied, pushing his hand away. "Where’s Jax?"

"Here."

The voice was wet and weak. Jax dragged himself around the corner of the generator. He wasn't walking. He was pulling his body with his arms. His chest was caved in on the left side, his breathing shallow and rattling.

"Ribs," Jax grunted, leaning his head back against the metal. "Punctured lung, maybe. Can't... take a deep breath."

Sadie looked at him. The tank. The unshakeable wall. He looked small. Grey.

And Torque.

The Warlord was still strapped to the sled a few feet away. He hadn't moved during the chaos. His skin was the color of ash. The black fluid leaking from his chest ports had stopped flowing—not because he was healed, but because he was empty.

"He has ten minutes," Gubbins whispered, following her gaze. "Maybe less. The Golem-Drive is barely ticking. If the core temperature drops below critical... he’s just a statue."

Sadie looked at her team. A broken tank. A dying warlord. A terrified mechanic. And her—a Level 0 liability.

She looked at Thorne. The spirit stood guard at the corner, his silhouette imposing against the violet light of the pit. But even he was flickering. The edges of his armor were turning transparent.

"He’s fading," Sadie realized. "My stamina... I can't keep him manifested."

"I AM HERE," Thorne rumbled, though his voice sounded distant, like it was coming through a thick wall. **"BUT THE ANCHOR IS HEAVY. YOU ARE TIRED, SADIE."**

"I know," Sadie whispered.

She closed her eyes. She needed a potion. She needed a healer. She needed a miracle.

But she was a Treasurer. She didn't believe in miracles. She believed in audits.

"We can't fight them," Sadie said softly. "Rictus has twenty men up there. High ground. Crossbows. And he’s sucking the pit dry to buff himself. If we charge that ramp, we die."

"So we run?" Gubbins asked hopefully. "The exit is clear. Thorne scared them off."

"We can't run," Sadie pointed at Torque. "He dies if we move him again. He needs the stabilizer fluid. And Rictus has it."

She looked up at the High Altar. Rictus was hooking himself up to a massive version of the extraction machine—a chaotic web of hoses and pumps connected directly to the violet fissure in the ground.

"He’s plugging in," Sadie whispered. "He’s going to mainline the canyon."

A cold, hard clarity washed over her. It pushed back the pain. It pushed back the fear.

"We don't need to fight him," Sadie said. "We need to overload him."

Sadie forced herself to stand. She swayed, grabbing the generator for support.

"Gubbins," she said. "The machine. The one he’s building up there. How does it work?"

Gubbins blinked, wiping his nose. He looked up at the High Altar. "It’s a Siphon. It uses a vacuum pump to pull raw magic from the pit, filters it through a condenser, and turns it into liquid XP. It’s... it’s actually brilliant engineering, if it wasn't made of garbage."

"Filters," Sadie repeated. "It filters the magic."

"Yeah," Gubbins nodded. "The pit is raw glitch-energy. If you drink it straight, it burns your insides out. You turn into a Glitch-Mob. The machine refines it. Makes it stable."

Sadie looked at the bubbling violet pit in the center of the room. It hissed and popped, spitting toxic sparks.

"What happens if the filter breaks?" Sadie asked.

Gubbins’ eyes went wide. "Then... it pumps raw chaos directly into his veins. It would over-level him instantly. His stats would integer-overflow. He’d explode."

Sadie smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. It was the smile of a woman who had just found a discrepancy in the ledger.

"He wants to be a god," Sadie whispered. "Let's give him what he wants. All of it."

She turned to Jax.

"Can you move?"

Jax gritted his teeth. He grabbed a piece of scrap metal and used it as a crutch to haul himself upright. He swayed, pale as death, but he stood.

"I can hold a line," Jax wheezed. "For a minute. Maybe two."

"I don't need a line," Sadie said. "I need a distraction."

She pointed to the base of the High Altar. There was a cluster of support struts holding up the platform.

"Rictus is looking at me," Sadie said. "He wants the Treasury. He's obsessed with it. I'm going to walk right up the main ramp. I'm going to offer him a deal."

"He'll kill you," Gubbins squeaked.

"He'll try," Sadie corrected. "But while he's looking at me... you and Torque are going to kill the machine."

She looked at the Warlord on the sled.

"Torque isn't dead yet," Sadie said. "And he's still holding that grenade."

Sadie knelt beside the sled.

Torque's eye was open, staring blankly at the ceiling. His breath was a shallow, hitching rattle.

"Torque," Sadie whispered. "Warlord."

The eye moved. It focused on her, slowly, painfully.

"Treasurer," Torque rasped. It was barely a sound.

"I have a job for you," Sadie said. "One last contract."

Torque’s lips twitched. A ghost of a smile. "Does it... pay well?"

"It pays in revenge," Sadie said. "And stabilizer fluid. If we survive."

She reached into his belt and pulled out the grenade. It was an old Guild-issue frag, heavy and scarred. She placed it in his mechanical hand.

His fingers didn't close. The servos were dead.

"My hand," Torque whispered. "Offline."

"I know," Sadie said. She took a roll of copper wire from Gubbins’ pocket. She wrapped the grenade into Torque’s hand, binding it tight. Then she tied a length of wire to the pin and looped the other end around his thumb.

"You don't need a servo," Sadie said. "You just need to twitch. Can you twitch, Torque?"

Torque closed his organic eye. He took a breath that sounded like grinding gears.

"For you..." he wheezed. "...I can move mountains."

"Just the pin," Sadie said softly. "Just the pin."

She stood up.

"Gubbins," she ordered. "You're the delivery system. You have to drag the sled under the platform. Right under the main intake valve of the Siphon."

"Under the valve?" Gubbins looked at the massive, hissing machinery. "But... if Torque blows the valve... the raw magic will dump right on top of us!"

"Not if you're fast," Sadie said. "You place him. You arm him. And you run."

Gubbins looked at the dying Warlord. He looked at the terrifying machine. He looked at Sadie’s broken arm.

He took a deep breath. He pulled his goggles down over his eyes.

"I’m fast," Gubbins said. "I’m a rogue-class engineer."

"Good," Sadie turned to Jax. "Jax, you're with them. Keep the cultists off their backs. If anyone looks under that platform, you make them regret it."

Jax nodded. He hefted a heavy iron pipe. "Understood."

Sadie turned to face the ramp.

Up on the High Altar, Rictus was screaming. He had connected a hose to his arm. Violet light was pumping into him. He was growing larger, his skin cracking with the energy.

"He’s starting the download," Sadie said. "Thorne?"

The spirit stepped up beside her. He was fading, his form translucent, but his sword was solid.

"I AM READY."

"We aren't fighting him, Thorne," Sadie said. "We're bait."

"I DO NOT LIKE BEING BAIT."

"Me neither," Sadie admitted. She touched the Treasury band. "So let's make sure the trap snaps shut."

Sadie walked into the light.

She stepped out from behind the generator, walking straight down the center of the amphitheater toward the ramp. She limped, her broken arm held tight against her chest, but her head was high.

Thorne walked beside her, a towering bodyguard of fading red iron.

"Rictus!" Sadie screamed. Her voice cracked, raw and bloody, but it echoed off the canyon walls.

Up on the platform, Rictus froze. He looked down.

"The Treasurer returns!" Rictus laughed. His voice was distorted now, layered with the static of the glitch. "Did you come to surrender? Or did you come to watch me ascend?"

"I came to trade!" Sadie yelled. She stopped at the base of the ramp.

"Trade?" Rictus sneered. "You have nothing I want! I have the pit! I have the power!"

"You have *sludge*!" Sadie shouted. She held up her left hand. The Ruby gem flared, bright and pure.

"You're drinking gutter-water, Rictus! Look at this! Look at the clarity! This is a Prime Soul! This is the source code!"

Rictus stared. The hunger in his eyes flared, overpowering the logic. He saw the red light. He remembered the taste of the Berserker's rage—the stability it offered.

"The vintage," Rictus whispered.

"You want to stabilize that mess inside you?" Sadie taunted. "You need a binding agent. You need Thorne."

She took a step up the ramp.

"Come and get him."

Rictus's eyes narrowed. He signaled his guards. "Hold fire! I want the gem intact!"

He stepped to the edge of the platform, the hose still attached to his arm pulsing with violet light.

"Bring it to me," Rictus commanded. "Bring me the cup."

Sadie kept walking.

Behind her, in the shadows beneath the platform, Gubbins was dragging the sled.

Scrape. Scrape.

The sound was masked by the humming of the machine and Rictus's own manic laughter.

Jax limped behind them, his pipe raised, watching the shadows.

Sadie counted the steps.

Ten steps to the top. Twenty seconds for Gubbins to find the valve. Thirty seconds for Torque to pull the pin.

She had to keep him talking.

"You think you can control it?" Sadie asked, climbing higher. "You think you can handle a Warlord's soul? He broke your machine, Rictus. He'll break you."

"I am expanded!" Rictus roared, spreading his arms. "My inventory is infinite! I can hold a thousand souls!"

"You're glitching," Sadie pointed out. "Look at your hands."

Rictus looked. His fingers were flickering. Phasing in and out of existence.

"Minor texture error!" Rictus dismissed it. "Once I have the Berserker, I will solidify! I will be permanent!"

Sadie reached the middle of the ramp. She stopped.

She could hear the *scrape* of the sled directly underneath the platform. They were in position.

She looked up at Rictus.

"You know what the problem with infinite inventory is?" Sadie asked softly.

Rictus leaned over the railing, leering at her. "What?"

Sadie smiled.

"It takes too long to find the exit."

She grabbed the railing with her good hand.

"NOW!" Sadie screamed.

Under the platform, Gubbins froze.

He was staring at the main intake valve of the Siphon. It was a massive pipe made of glass and brass, pulsing with the raw, volatile magic of the pit.

He pushed the sled directly under it.

Torque lay there. He looked dead. His eye was closed.

"Torque!" Gubbins hissed. "Now! Pull it!"

Torque didn't move.

"Torque!" Gubbins shook him. "Wake up!"

Above them, Rictus roared. "Deception! Kill her!"

Heavy boots thudded on the platform above.

"He’s gone!" Gubbins wailed. "He’s gone!"

Jax limped forward. He looked at the Warlord. He looked at the grenade wired to his hand.

"He’s not gone," Jax growled.

He reached down. He didn't try to wake Torque. He grabbed the copper wire tied to the pin.

"Fire in the hole," Jax whispered.

He yanked the wire.

PING.

The spoon of the grenade flew off.

"Run!" Jax grabbed Gubbins by the collar and threw himself backward, behind a heavy support pillar.

Torque’s eye snapped open.

He saw the valve above him. He saw the grenade in his hand.

He didn't twitch. He smiled.

"BOOM," Torque whispered.

KRA-KOOM.

The explosion was contained, directed upward by the sled’s polymer shield. It slammed into the glass intake valve.

The valve didn't just break. It vaporized.

The pressurized flow of raw, unfiltered glitch-magic—meant to be sipped—was suddenly unleashed like a fire hose.

A geyser of violet light erupted through the floor of the platform.

Right under Rictus’s feet.

Chapter 15

The explosion didn't sound like a bomb. It sounded like the world inhaling.

For a split second, the **Bleeding Canyon** went silent. The violet geyser that had erupted beneath the High Altar hung suspended in the air, a column of pure, unadulterated glitch-fire.

Then, reality snapped back.

KRA-KOOM.

The shockwave flattened the Stat-Eater camp. Tents disintegrated. Machines were torn from their bolts and thrown like toys. The dust cloud rose instantly, thick and choking, turning the amphitheater into a grey twilight.

Sadie Miller lay curled in a ball behind the wreckage of the generator, shielding her face with her good arm. Debris rained down around her—shards of glass, twisted metal, and wet chunks of earth.

"Thorne!" she screamed, her voice lost in the roar.

A heavy shadow fell over her.

"I AM HERE."

Thorne knelt over her, his massive iron form acting as a bunker. Rocks bounced off his pauldrons. A piece of rebar struck his helmet, sparking wildly. He didn't flinch. He was fading, his edges turning to red mist, but he held his ground.

Sadie peeked out from under his arm. She looked toward the High Altar.

It was gone. The ramp, the platform, the machine—all of it had been swallowed by the violet light.

"We got him," she whispered. "We overloaded him."

Then the light began to move.

It wasn't dissipating. It was *condensing*.

In the center of the crater, where Rictus had stood, a shape was rising. It was colossal. A tangled mass of steel girders, server racks, and human flesh, all fused together by the raw, crackling energy of the glitch.

Two massive, glowing eyes opened in the wreckage. They weren't eyes; they were voids of scrolling code.

"ERROR," the thing roared. The voice was Rictus, but amplified, distorted, layered over the sound of grinding metal. **"SYSTEM... REBOOT... INITIATED."**

He hadn't exploded. He had upgraded.

"He ate it," Sadie breathed, horror cold in her chest. "He ate the whole pit."

The Rictus-Thing shifted, a massive arm made of twisted crane parts smashing into the canyon wall. The impact shook the ground, knocking Sadie flat.

"We have to go!" Gubbins' voice cut through the panic.

Sadie scrambled to her knees. She crawled through the dust to where the sled had been dragged.

It was a slaughterhouse scene.

Torque lay on his back. The polymer shield of the sled was blackened and cracked. His left arm—the mechanical one—was gone. The grenade had severed it just below the elbow. Wires and synthetic muscle hung in tatters, sparking weakly.

But the worst part was the silence.

The Golem-Drive in his chest wasn't thumping. It was clicking.

Click... Click... Click.

"He's stalling!" Gubbins shrieked. The gnome was covered in black oil, trying desperately to clamp a severed fuel line with a pair of vice grips.

"The core temperature is dropping! If it hits zero, the mag-lock seizes! He'll never restart!"

"Stabilizer!" Sadie yelled, grabbing Gubbins by the shoulder. "Did we get it? Did the machine drop any vials?"

Gubbins pointed a shaking finger at the crater. "The machine is gone, Sadie! It's part of *him* now!"

Sadie looked at the Rictus-Monster. The wreckage of the Siphon was embedded in its chest, glowing with the consumed magic.

"We failed," Sadie whispered. She looked at Torque's remaining eye. It was fixed on her, dim and glazing over.

"No," Jax grunted.

The big man dragged himself closer. He pointed upward, past the smoke, past the monster.

"Look."

Sadie looked up.

High above the chaos, a single, twisted crane arm jutted out from the canyon wall. It had been bent by the explosion, stripped of its cables.

But hanging from the tip of the arm, swinging wildly in the toxic wind, was a dented steel tank.

It was painted with a blue stripe.

[Coolant Reservoir: Class A]

The main tank. It had been thrown clear of the platform before the fusion.

A drop of thick, blue liquid fell from a ruptured hose at the bottom of the tank. It fell sixty feet, landing in the dust near Sadie's boot.

Hiss.

"It's leaking," Gubbins gasped. "That's the pure stuff! High-grade stabilizer!"

"We need it," Sadie said. "Gubbins, can you reach it?"

Gubbins shook his head frantically. "I can't climb! I’m too short! The rungs are five feet apart!"

"Jax?"

Jax looked at his crushed leg. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

Sadie looked at the tank. It was hanging sixty feet up. The only way to reach it was to climb the wreckage of the scaffolding—the same wreckage that Rictus was currently smashing to pieces.

She looked at her right arm. It was splinted, useless dead weight against her chest.

She looked at her left hand. The hand with the Treasury.

"Thorne," she whispered.

"I CANNOT FLY, SADIE," the spirit rumbled, his voice weak. **"AND I CANNOT CARRY YOU. I AM... HOLLOW."**

He was almost transparent now. The effort of the Resonance Dive and the explosion shield had drained him. He was barely holding onto the physical plane.

Sadie looked at Torque. The click in his chest was getting slower.

Click..... Click.

"He has three minutes," Gubbins sobbed.

Sadie stood up. She tightened the strap of her coat. She checked the knot on her splint.

"I’m going," she said.

"Sadie, you have one arm!" Jax roared, trying to grab her. "You'll fall!"

"Then catch me," Sadie said.

She didn't look back. She ran toward the wall of debris.

The climb was an exercise in agony.

Sadie jammed her left boot into a gap in the twisted rebar. She reached up with her left hand—her only hand—and grabbed a piece of jagged metal. She hauled herself up.

Her broken arm swung against her ribs.

THUD.

White spots danced in her vision. She screamed through her teeth, biting her lip until she tasted copper.

"Move," she commanded her legs. "Just move."

She climbed. Ten feet. Twenty feet.

The environment was hostile. The **Bleeding Canyon** was reacting to Rictus's transformation. Gravity rippled. One moment Sadie felt heavy as lead; the next, she felt weightless.

She reached for a handhold—a steel pipe. As her fingers touched it, the metal liquefied, turning into grey sludge.

"Glitch!" she gasped, her hand slipping.

She fell backward.

"GRIP."

A phantom red hand slammed onto her wrist, pinning her to the wall. It was Thorne. He wasn't fully manifested—just an arm, floating beside her.

"I HAVE YOU," his voice whispered in her mind.

Sadie regained her footing. "Thanks, partner."

She kept climbing. Forty feet.

The heat was intensifying. Rictus was glowing below her, radiating waves of violet radiation.

She looked down. The monster was thrashing, smashing cultists who were too slow to run. He hadn't seen her yet. He was too busy being born.

She reached the crane arm.

It stuck out from the cliff face like a broken finger. At the end of it, ten feet out over the abyss, hung the blue tank.

Sadie crawled along the arm. The metal was hot enough to scorch her clothes. The wind whipped her hair into her eyes.

She reached the end. She wrapped her legs around the crane arm and reached down.

The tank was heavy. It swayed on its hose.

"Come here," Sadie grunted, stretching her left hand out. Her fingers brushed the cold steel of the reservoir.

Below her, a roar shook the canyon.

"USER DETECTED."

Sadie froze.

She looked down. Rictus was looking up. His massive, code-filled eyes locked onto her.

"Little rat," the monster boomed. "Stealing my juice?"

He raised a massive arm. It was made of girders and rebar, enveloped in violet flame. It swung toward her like a falling building.

Sadie couldn't dodge. She was clinging to a metal beam sixty feet in the air with one hand.

"Thorne!" she screamed.

The air beside her shimmered.

"I AM THE WALL!"

Thorne manifested. He didn't try to attack. He threw his body between Sadie and the giant fist.

CRASH.

The impact was devastating.

Thorne shattered.

He didn't die—spirits couldn't die like that—but his form exploded into red mist. The force of the blow bent the crane arm ninety degrees.

Sadie was thrown loose.

She fell.

Her hand scrabbled for purchase. She caught the hose of the blue tank.

She jerked to a halt, dangling in mid-air, holding onto the rubber line. The tank groaned above her.

"Sadie!" Jax’s voice floated up from the ground.

Rictus laughed. **"DELETE."**

He raised his fist for a second strike.

Sadie looked at the tank. It was too heavy to carry. She couldn't unhook it.

But attached to the side was a smaller emergency canister. A liter of fluid. Enough for one heart.

She didn't have a hand to spare. She was holding the hose with her left hand. Her right arm was broken.

She used her teeth.

She bit the leather strap holding the canister. She tore at it, spitting leather and dust.

Rictus’s fist was coming down.

SNAP.

The strap broke. Sadie grabbed the canister with her knees, clamping it tight.

She let go of the hose.

She dropped.

Gravity took her. The wind screamed in her ears.

Above her, Rictus's fist smashed the blue tank. It exploded, showering the canyon in wasted fluid.

Sadie plummeted. The ground rushed up to meet her.

"Thorne!" she screamed at the empty air. "Catch me!"

There was no answer. The band was silent.

She was going to hit.

Then, a shadow moved.

It wasn't Thorne.

It was Jax.

The crippled tank didn't run. He threw himself. He lunged from his position, diving under her falling trajectory. He didn't catch her in his arms—he couldn't stand. He used his body as a cushion.

WHUMP.

Sadie hit Jax.

The impact knocked the wind out of both of them. Jax roared in pain as his broken ribs took the force. They rolled in the dust, a tangle of limbs and groans.

Sadie lay there, staring at the violet sky. She was alive.

She checked her legs. The canister of stabilizer fluid was still clamped between her knees.

"Jax?" she wheezed.

Jax coughed, spitting pink froth. "Did... did we get the loot?"

Sadie grabbed the canister. It was dented, but intact. The blue liquid sloshed inside.

"We got it," she whispered.

She rolled off him and crawled to the sled.

Torque was silent. The clicking had stopped.

"No," Sadie gasped. "No, no, no."

She fumbled with the canister. She ripped the cap off with her teeth. She jammed the nozzle into the emergency intake port on Torque's neck.

She squeezed the bottle.

The blue fluid drained into the Warlord.

They waited.

One second. Two seconds.

Rictus roared above them, searching the debris for his kill.

TH-THUMP.

A sound. Deep. Heavy.

The Golem-Drive kicked.

Torque's eye snapped open. It glowed with a faint, steady green light.

He inhaled—a ragged, blessed breath of air.

"System," Torque rasped, his voice sounding like gravel in a mixer. "System reboot... successful."

Sadie slumped against the sled. Tears streamed down her face, cutting through the grime.

"Welcome back," she whispered.

She looked at her wrist. The Treasury band was dull, the Ruby gem dark grey. Thorne was dormant, exhausted by the sacrifice.

They were battered. They were broken. But they were whole.

"We have to move," Gubbins hissed, pulling at Sadie’s sleeve. "The monster is coming down."

Sadie looked up. Rictus was tearing himself free from the cliff face, descending into the amphitheater to finish the job.

"Jax," Sadie said. "Can you move?"

Jax groaned, rolling onto his side. "If Torque drives... I can ride."

Sadie helped Gubbins push the sled. Torque’s engine hummed, providing a low-grade hover assist. They loaded Jax onto the back of the polymer sheet.

Sadie grabbed the cable with her good hand.

"Let's go," she said.

They turned their backs on the Glitch-King and ran into the shadows of the canyon, leaving the ruins of the factory behind.

Chapter 16

The sound of the Golem-Drive was a beautiful, terrifying scream.

It wasn't the rhythmic thrum of a well-oiled machine anymore. It was a jagged, high-pitched whine, like a jet turbine ingesting gravel. The blue stabilizer fluid was burning hot in Torque’s veins, pushing the engine past its redline.

The white polymer sled hovered six inches off the violet sand, vibrating so violently that Sadie’s teeth rattled in her skull.

"Left!" Gubbins shrieked, leaning his entire body weight against the side of the sled.

Sadie gritted her teeth and shoved. Her good shoulder burned as she forced the sled to bank.

WHOOSH.

A floating boulder the size of a minivan whipped past their heads, missing them by inches. The slipstream tore at Sadie’s coat.

"We’re going too fast!" Jax yelled from the back of the sled. He was clinging to the cargo straps with white-knuckled desperation, his broken leg bouncing painfully with every tremor.

"Not fast enough!" Sadie screamed back, looking over her shoulder.

Behind them, the **Bleeding Canyon** was being rewritten.

Rictus was coming.

He wasn't running. He was flowing. The Stat-Eater had become a landslide of glitching matter. He was twenty feet tall, a chaotic mass of twisted girders, server racks, and grey flesh. He didn't navigate the canyon; he widened it.

CRASH.

Rictus smashed through a stone archway, turning the rock into a shower of pixelated dust. His roar sounded like a stadium speaker blowing out—a wall of distorted bass and static.

"BUFF... ME," the monster boomed.

He reached out a hand made of three crane arms fused together. He grabbed a floating rock and crushed it, absorbing the data. He grew larger.

"He’s gaining!" Gubbins wailed. "The terrain penalties don't apply to him! He’s clipping through the walls!"

"Torque!" Sadie yelled, leaning over the Warlord. "Can we get more thrust?"

Torque lay strapped to the sled, his one remaining eye glowing a fierce, steady green. His chest—where the Golem-Drive was exposed—was radiating heat that scorched Sadie’s face.

"I’m giving you 110%," Torque rasped, his voice sounding like grinding gears. "Any more and the core goes critical. We melt the sled."

"Melt it!" Sadie ordered. "I’d rather burn than be eaten!"

She looked ahead. The violet sand blurred into a streak of neon color. They were approaching the **Code-Wall Sector**—the narrow bottleneck where Gubbins had hacked the barrier.

If they could get through the pass, the canyon narrowed. Rictus was too big to fit. He’d have to smash his way through, which would slow him down.

"The bottleneck!" Sadie pointed. "Aim for the center!"

But as the dust cleared, Sadie’s heart stopped.

The pass wasn't empty.

Standing in a shield wall across the narrow gap were thirty figures.

They were Stat-Eaters, but they had changed. Exposure to the raw magic of Rictus’s ascension had mutated them. Their armor was fused to their skin.

Their crossbows weren't held in their hands; they grew out of their forearms, bone and wood twisted together.

They stood perfectly still, eyes glowing violet, blocked the exit.

"Ambush!" Jax roared.

"Brake!" Gubbins yelled, digging his heels into the sand.

"No brakes!" Sadie screamed. She grabbed Gubbins by the collar and yanked him back. "If we stop, Rictus catches us! We ram them!"

"Ram them?" Gubbins squeaked. "Sadie, that’s a wall of spikes! We’re on a piece of plastic!"

Sadie looked at Torque. The Warlord was staring at the blockade. He didn't look worried. He looked focused.

"Treasurer," Torque growled. "My arm is gone. But my shoulder is not."

He rolled his head to the left.

Mounted on his left pauldron, fused directly into his cybernetic skeleton, was a heavy mortar tube. In the old days, it was an auto-targeting siege weapon. Now, it was just a tube of cold steel.

"The targeting system is offline," Torque said. "I can't see the arc. I need a spotter."

Sadie looked at the wall of enemies. They were three hundred yards away and closing fast.

"I’m your eyes," Sadie said. She slid down next to him, ignoring the agony in her splinted arm. "What’s the payload?"

"Kinetic Pulse," Torque grunted. "Non-lethal. High impact. It’s a shield-breaker."

"Perfect."

Sadie looked ahead. She channeled her old interface. She didn't see the blue lines of the System, but she saw the geometry. She saw the distance. She

saw the speed.

"Elevation... fifteen degrees!" Sadie screamed over the wind. "Windage... three clicks left!"

Torque gritted his teeth. The servos in his neck whined as he adjusted his torso, tilting the sled slightly to aim the tube.

"Range?" Torque asked.

"Two hundred yards!"

The cultists raised their mutated arms. A volley of bone-bolts filled the air.

THWACK. THWACK.

Bolts slammed into the sled's polymer shield. One grazed Sadie's cheek, leaving a stinging line of fire.

"Hold..." Sadie whispered, watching the wall rush closer. "Hold..."

"Sadie!" Gubbins covered his head.

"One hundred yards!" Sadie yelled. "FIRE!"

Torque roared. A piston in his shoulder fired.

THUMP.

The sled bucked violently, driving the rear into the sand.

A silver canister shot out of the mortar tube. It arced through the violet air, whistling like a banshee.

It hit the center of the cultist line.

There was no fire. No explosion.

Just a sphere of pure, distorted air expanding outward at the speed of sound.

WHAM.

The shield wall disintegrated. Bodies were thrown into the canyon walls with sickening crunches. The Cultists in the center were simply flattened,

pressed into the dirt by the invisible hammer of the kinetic pulse.

A hole opened in the blockade. A hole exactly the size of a hover-sled.

"Through the gap!" Sadie commanded.

Torque gunned the engine. The sled surged forward, lifting higher.

They hit the smoke cloud.

Sadie squeezed her eyes shut. She felt the *thud-thud-thud* of bodies hitting the bottom of the sled. She heard the screams of the mutated cultists as they were mowed down by the Warlord’s ride.

They burst out the other side, covered in dust and violet blood.

"We’re through!" Jax cheered, his voice hoarse.

"Don't celebrate yet!" Sadie warned.

She looked back.

Rictus had reached the blockade. He didn't bother to fight his own men. He just stepped on them.

"TREASURER!" the monster bellowed. **"YOU CANNOT LOG OUT!"**

Rictus raised his right arm.

It didn't look like an arm anymore. It looked like a bundle of transatlantic cables woven together with muscle.

He threw it.

The arm stretched. It elongated, the texture glitching and repeating, shooting forward like a harpoon.

It crossed the distance in a heartbeat.

"Duck!" Sadie yelled.

The giant hand slammed into the sand behind the sled. The fingers—each the size of a person—dug deep into the earth.

But it wasn't aiming for them. It was aiming for the sled.

Rictus’s hand snagged the rear bumper of the polymer sheet.

JERK.

The sled stopped dead.

Sadie flew forward, slamming into Torque’s chest. Jax nearly went over the front, catching himself on the cargo straps. Gubbins tumbled into the sand.

The Golem-Drive screamed, the turbine spinning wildly against the resistance.

"He’s got us!" Jax yelled, hacking at the giant fingers with his iron pipe. The metal rang off Rictus’s skin like it was hitting stone.

"Reeling!" Sadie gasped.

She looked back. Rictus was standing four hundred yards away, anchoring himself against the canyon walls. He began to pull.

The sled groaned. Slowly, inexorably, they were dragged backward.

The sand churned around them. Torque’s engine was fighting a losing battle. The blue flame from the exhaust was turning white.

"Overheat imminent!" Torque warned. "Core at 98%!"

"Cut the strap!" Gubbins yelled, scrambling back onto the sled. "Cut the bumper!"

"It’s reinforced polymer!" Sadie shouted. "We can't cut it!"

She looked at the massive, glitching arm stretching back to the monster. It was pulsing with violet light, transferring data and strength.

They were being fished. And they were the bait.

"Thorne!" Sadie screamed.

She grabbed the Treasury band. It was dull, cold.

"Thorne, wake up! We need an edge!"

Nothing. The spirit was exhausted.

Sadie looked at the giant hand gripping the sled. She looked at Rictus, pulling them into his maw.

She grabbed the rusted iron of the band. She didn't use mana. She used **Resonance**. She poured her panic, her stubborn refusal to die, into the metal.

"I am not inventory!" Sadie screamed.

A spark.

Inside the Ruby gem, a red ember woke up.

"NOT... INVENTORY."

The air above the sled shimmered. Heat rolled off Sadie in waves.

Thorne manifested.

He wasn't the giant warrior this time. He didn't have the energy for legs or a helmet.

He appeared as a floating torso of solid, angry iron, wielding **The Sunderer**.

He looked at the hand gripping the sled. He looked at Sadie’s desperate face.

"GET OFF... MY... SHIP."

Thorne didn't swing the sword. He *became* the sword.

He dissolved into a streak of red light that slammed into The Sunderer. The greatsword spun in the air, glowing white-hot.

It dropped.

SHINK.

The blade severed Rictus’s arm at the wrist.

"ERROR!" Rictus screamed in the distance. The severed hand went limp, dissolving into grey pixels.

The tension broke.

BOOM.

Released from the anchor, the sled shot forward like a bullet. The acceleration pinned Sadie against Torque’s chest. The G-force was crushing.

They rocketed down the canyon, leaving a trail of blue fire and violet dust.

"Brakes!" Sadie yelled. "Torque, brakes!"

"No brakes!" Torque roared, laughing manically. "We ride the crash!"

They hit a dune. The sled went airborne.

For a second, they were flying. Silence wrapped around them.

Then they hit the ground.

They skidded, spun, and crashed into a pile of loose scree at the base of a cliff. The sled flipped onto its side, dumping them into the dirt.

Dust settled over them.

Sadie lay on her back, staring up at the violet sky. Her splinted arm was throbbing with a pulse that matched her heart.

"Status?" she wheezed.

"Alive," Jax groaned from somewhere in the pile.

"Functional," Torque rasped. The engine was ticking as it cooled.

"I think I swallowed a bug," Gubbins spat.

Sadie sat up. She looked back down the canyon.

Rictus was howling. He was regenerating his arm, pulling stone and scrap from the walls to rebuild the limb. But he was far away.

They had escaped the kill box.

"He’s still coming," Sadie said, struggling to her feet. "He’ll rebuild. He’ll track us."

She looked at the canyon walls around them. They were narrow here. Unstable. The strata flickered with glitch-lines.

"We need to close the door," Sadie said.

"Close it?" Gubbins asked, wiping slime from his goggles. "Sadie, that’s a mile-wide canyon."

"It’s a glitch," Sadie corrected. "It’s unstable code. If we hit the right line... the whole thing collapses."

She looked at Torque.

"Do you have another shell?"

Torque checked his ammo counter. It was a manual dial on his shoulder.

"One," the Warlord grunted. "High explosive."

"Save it," Sadie ordered. "We aren't running anymore. We find a choke point. And we bury him."

She looked at her team. Battered. Broken. Bleeding.

But they were standing.

"Let's bring down the house," Sadie said.

Chapter 17

The **Needle’s Eye** was a place where geology went to die.

Here, deep in the necrotic heart of the Bleeding Canyon, the walls didn't rise; they hovered. Massive slabs of granite, some the size of city blocks, floated in the violet air, separated by buzzing fields of static electricity. They groaned and ground against each other, a tectonic chorus that vibrated in the marrow of Sadie’s bones.

"Stop," Sadie rasped, tapping Torque’s shoulder.

The polymer sled skidded to a halt, kicking up a fan of purple dust. The Golem-Drive whined down to an idle, the sound swallowed by the oppressive humming of the canyon.

Sadie slid off the sled. Her legs wobbled. Her splinted arm was a dead weight of throbbing agony, held against her chest by a strip of dirty cloth. She looked up.

Directly above them, suspended by nothing but the broken code of the world, was a boulder the size of a dreadnought. It was jagged, ugly, and vibrating.

"This is it," Sadie whispered.

"This is what?" Jax asked, limping up beside her. He leaned heavily on his iron pipe, his face grey with pain. "It looks like a tomb, Sadie."

"It’s a choke point," Sadie corrected. She pointed to the narrow path they had just traversed—a corridor of stone barely twenty feet wide. "Rictus is huge. He’s expanding. To get to us, he has to squeeze through there."

She gestured to the floating boulder above the path.

"And that," she said, "is the hammer."

Gubbins crawled off the sled, looking at the floating rocks with a mixture of awe and nausea. He pulled out a piece of string with a heavy nut tied to the

end—a makeshift plumb line.

"Sadie," the gnome squeaked. "Look at the line."

He held it up. The nut didn't hang straight down. It hung sideways, pointing at the canyon wall at a forty-five-degree angle.

"Gravity is... loose here," Gubbins said, swallowing hard. "Local fields are distorted by the glitch density. It’s like being inside a magnet."

"Does mass still exist?" Sadie asked sharply.

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then if we blow the anchor, the rock moves," Sadie cut him off. "I don't care if it falls down, sideways, or does a pirouette. If that rock hits Rictus, he stops."

She turned to Torque. The Warlord was still strapped to the sled, his one eye glowing in the gloom. The mortar tube on his shoulder was blackened from the last shot.

"One shell," Sadie said. "High Explosive. Can you make the shot?"

Torque swiveled his head, the servos whining. He looked at the massive floating boulder.

"It’s a stationary target," Torque grunted. "I could hit it blindfolded. But I need to know where to hit. If I hit the center, I just chip it. We need to break the static field holding it in place."

"The Keystone," Sadie nodded. She turned to Gubbins. "Find it."

Gubbins froze. He looked at the chaotic mess of floating stone. In the old days, his **[Structural Analysis]** skill would have highlighted the weak point in glowing red. He would have seen the stress lines, the load-bearing nodes.

Now, he just saw a lot of scary rocks.

"I... I can't be sure," Gubbins stammered, wringing his hands. "Without the overlay... I'm just guessing! If I pick the wrong spot, the rock might just spin! Or worse, it might stabilize!"

"Guess better," Sadie hissed. She grabbed the gnome by his collar, pulling him close. "Listen to me. That monster is ten minutes behind us. He is eating the world to get to me. If we don't bury him here, we die here."

She pointed at the boulder.

"Use your eyes, Gubbins. Not the System. Your eyes. Look at the tension. Look at the way it vibrates."

Gubbins trembled. He took a deep breath, pushing his cracked goggles up his forehead. He squinted.

He watched the dust motes dancing in the air. He watched the subtle, rhythmic shudder of the massive stone. He looked for the point of stillness amidst the vibration.

"There," Gubbins whispered. He pointed to a small, jagged protrusion near the base of the boulder, where a vein of violet crystal pulsed. "That crystal... it’s acting as a conductor for the static field. It’s the anchor pin."

"Are you sure?" Jax asked.

Gubbins looked at Sadie. He saw the trust in her desperate, bloodshot eyes.

"I'm an engineer," Gubbins said, his voice firming up. "I know how things fall apart."

"Target locked," Sadie said. She turned to Torque. "Dial it in. The crystal spur at the base. High Explosive. On my mark."

They waited.

The silence of the Needle’s Eye was heavy, pressing against their eardrums. It wasn't a true silence; it was a wall of white noise—the sound of the glitch vibrating at a frequency just on the edge of hearing.

Sadie sat behind a slab of fallen rock, her good hand resting on Torque’s shoulder. Jax and Gubbins crouched behind the sled.

Thorne stood in the open.

The spirit was fading. His iron form was translucent, the red light of his core dimming to a dull ember. He looked like a ghost of a war that had ended centuries ago.

"HE COMES," Thorne rumbled.

The ground didn't shake. It rippled.

The violet dust on the canyon floor began to dance, forming complex geometric patterns. Small pebbles floated up into the air, suspended by the approaching pressure wave.

Then, the smell hit them.

Ozone. Rotting meat. Burning plastic.

"SADIE..."

The voice came from the canyon entrance. It wasn't a shout. It was a broadcast. It resonated in their teeth.

Rictus rounded the corner.

He was magnificent in his monstrosity. He had absorbed the Stat-Eater camp, the machines, and the very earth he walked on. He was thirty feet tall now, a lurching avalanche of scrap metal and grey flesh. His legs were gone, replaced by a churning mass of tank treads and grinding gears. His chest was an open furnace of violet light, where the wreckage of the Siphon still glowed.

He didn't walk. He flowed. He filled the canyon from wall to wall, scraping sparks from the stone.

He saw Thorne standing in the path.

Rictus stopped. His face—a giant, stretched mask of skin draped over a steel skull—twisted into a smile.

"The vintage," Rictus boomed. "You bottled it for me."

He surged forward. He didn't care about the narrow walls. He simply pushed them aside. Stone cracked and shattered as his bulk forced its way

into the Needle’s Eye.

"Wait for it," Sadie whispered, her fingernails digging into the dirt.

Rictus grew closer. One hundred yards. Fifty yards.

He was right under the floating boulder.

"Now!" Sadie screamed.

Torque roared. The mortar on his shoulder kicked.

THUMP.

The shell screamed through the air. It was a beautiful, ugly sound. A streak of fire in the violet gloom.

It hit the crystal spur perfectly.

BOOM.

The explosion was blinding. Shards of violet crystal sprayed outward like shrapnel. The static field holding the massive boulder hummed violently, then snapped with a sound like a breaking cello string.

"It’s going!" Gubbins yelled. "Timber!"

Sadie watched, breath held, waiting for the crush. Waiting for the satisfying crunch of Rictus being flattened into paste.

The boulder moved.

It shuddered. It detached from its invisible mooring.

And then, it fell.

Up.

Sadie blinked.

The massive stone, freed from the static anchor, didn't succumb to gravity. It succumbed to the glitch.

With a sickening *whoosh*, the thousands of tons of granite rocketed upward into the sky.

It was followed by the smaller rocks. The debris. The dust.

The entire landslide reversed. Instead of burying Rictus, the explosion cleared the air above him. The rocks shot into the stratosphere, disappearing into the violet clouds.

"What?" Sadie breathed.

"Inverted field!" Gubbins shrieked, tearing at his hair. "The explosion flipped the polarity! I forgot about the thermal expansion! Heat rises! In a glitch field, heat rises *literally*!"

Sadie stared.

Rictus stared. The monster looked up as the boulder vanished into the heavens. He looked confused for a second.

Then, he laughed.

It was a sound like tearing metal.

"PHYSICS IS A SUGGESTION, TREASURER!" Rictus bellowed. **"DID YOU FORGET?"**

He looked down at them. The path was clear. The trap was gone.

And they were out of ammo.

"Run," Sadie whispered.

But there was nowhere to run.

Behind them, the canyon ended. It was a cul-de-sac. A sheer cliff face of glitching, impenetrable code-rock rose five hundred feet into the air.

They had backed themselves into a corner to spring a trap that had just flown away.

Rictus surged forward. He didn't rush. He took his time. He spread his massive arms, blocking the only exit.

The debris field he created as he moved formed a wall of swirling junk.

"End of the line," Jax groaned, raising his pipe. "No exit."

Sadie stood up. She walked out from behind the rock.

She looked at her wrist. The Treasury band was dull. Thorne was barely visible.

She looked at Torque. His mortar was empty. His engine was overheating.

She looked at Rictus.

The monster stopped twenty feet away. He loomed over them, casting a shadow that smelled of death.

"A valiant effort," Rictus purred. He reached out a hand—a claw made of server racks—and tapped the canyon wall.

"But you made a classic error, Sadie."

He grinned.

"You assumed the rules still applied."

He raised his hand. He didn't strike. He pointed at the floating rocks above them—the ones that hadn't flown away yet.

"Containment," Rictus ordered.

The rocks obeyed. They drifted down, forming a circle around Sadie and her team. A cage of stone.

"I’m not going to eat you yet," Rictus said softly. "I’m full. I need to digest."

He sat down—a massive crash of metal settling into the dirt—blocking the path.

"We wait," Rictus said, closing his glowing eyes. "We wait until the battery runs dry."

He pointed at Thorne.

"When he fades... I feast."

Sadie looked at the spirit. Thorne flickered. He looked at her with sad, empty eyes.

"I AM SORRY, PARTNER," Thorne whispered. **"I CANNOT HOLD THE LINE."**

Sadie sank to her knees.

The trap had failed. The weapon was empty. And the monster was sitting on the doorstep, waiting for the lights to go out.

Chapter 18

The waiting was worse than the dying.

Inside the cage of floating rocks, the air was thick and still, tasting of copper and static electricity. The violet light of the **Bleeding Canyon** filtered through the gaps in the granite, casting long, bruised shadows across the dirt.

Sadie Miller sat with her back against a boulder that hovered six inches off the ground. She was holding her splinted right arm against her chest, her breathing shallow and ragged. Every inhale felt like breathing through a straw filled with sand.

Opposite her, Torque sat slumped against the sled. The Warlord had engaged his **Emergency Sleep Mode**. His green eye was dark. His chest—the Golem-Drive—was silent, save for a faint, rhythmic *tick... tick... tick* as the last dregs of the stabilizer fluid kept the pilot light burning.

Jax lay in the dirt, staring up at the sliver of purple sky visible through the roof of their prison. His face was the color of old ash. He was shivering, despite the heat radiating from the canyon floor.

"How long?" Jax whispered. His voice was thin, brittle.

"Until Thorne fades," Sadie answered. She looked at her left wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was dull. The iron band looked like scrap metal—pitted, rusted, and lifeless. The Ruby gem was dark grey, like a coal that had finally burned out.

Thorne was in there. But he was quiet. Too quiet.

Outside the rock cage, **Rictus** was humming.

It wasn't a battle song. It wasn't a chant. It was a tune Sadie recognized from a lifetime ago. A synthesized, looping melody that used to play in the loading lobbies of the lower sectors. A mindless, happy little jingle that repeated every eight bars.

Do-do-do... dee-da-do...

It was the sound of waiting for a match that never started.

"He’s playing with us," Gubbins whimpered, curling into a ball near Torque’s feet. "He’s a monster."

"No," Sadie whispered, listening to the tune. "Monsters roar. Monsters scream. That..." She gestured to the wall of stone separating them from the Glitch-King. "...that is a man who is bored."

The humming stopped.

"AUDIT QUERY," Rictus’s voice boomed. It wasn't the distorted roar of the monster anymore. It was smooth. Crisp. It resonated through the stone like a high-fidelity speaker. **"DO YOU KNOW THE MANUFACTURER, SADIE?"**

Sadie flinched. She looked at the gap in the rocks. Through it, she could see a massive, shifting shape of grey flesh and chrome.

"The Guild," Sadie called out, her voice raspy. "The Ancients. Who cares? It’s a rusted shackle."

A laugh echoed through the canyon. It wasn't a manic cackle. It was a dry, condescending chuckle.

"THE ANCIENTS," Rictus mused. **"SUCH A ROMANTIC TERM FOR 'PREVIOUS MANAGEMENT.' YOU SCAVENGERS ALWAYS MYTHOLOGIZE WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. YOU FIND A CIRCUIT BOARD AND CALL IT A TABLET OF THE GODS."**

The rocks shifted. Rictus was moving closer.

"IT WASN'T THE ANCIENTS, SADIE. IT WAS ME."

Sadie froze. She looked at Gubbins. The gnome looked terrified.

"You?" Sadie spat. "You're a Stat-Eater. You're a junkie living in a hole."

"I AM AN ARCHITECT," Rictus corrected. The voice dropped an octave, becoming dangerously human. **"MY NAME IS KEGAN. LEAD**

DEVELOPER. SECTOR 4 R&D. I WROTE THE PATCH THAT CREATED THE SOULBOUND CLASS. I CODED THE ITEM ON YOUR WRIST."

Sadie looked at the band. The iron felt suddenly colder.

"You're lying," she whispered.

"AM I?"

Through the gap in the rocks, a massive eye appeared. It wasn't glowing violet anymore. It was a calm, blue iris, projected onto a screen of living flesh.

"LOOK AT THE INNER BAND, SADIE. THE INSCRIPTION. YOU CAN'T READ IT BECAUSE IT'S ENCRYPTED IN HEX. BUT I KNOW WHAT IT SAYS."

Sadie instinctively rubbed her thumb over the inside of the iron ring. There were grooves there. Tiny, microscopic etchings she had always assumed were runes.

"PROJECT ETERNITY," Rictus recited softly. **"BUILD 0.9. PROPERTY OF THE GUILD."**

Sadie’s blood ran cold.

"IT WASN'T A WEAPON, YOU STUPID GIRL," Rictus hissed. **"IT WAS A LIFEBOAT."**

The silence that followed was heavy enough to crush bone.

"A lifeboat?" Jax whispered, struggling to sit up.

Rictus shifted his bulk, the sound of grinding metal echoing like thunder.

"THE SERVER CRASH WASN'T A SURPRISE," Rictus explained, his voice taking on the lecture tone of a professor speaking to a slow child. **"THE GUILD KNEW THE SYSTEM WAS UNSTABLE. THE ECONOMY WAS COLLAPSING. THE MAGIC WAS LEAKING. THE END WAS COMING."**

He tapped a massive metal finger against the rock cage.

"THE ELITE... THE DIRECTORS... THEY WANTED A WAY OUT. THEY WANTED TO UPLOAD THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS INTO THE SYSTEM BEFORE THE HARDWARE FAILED. TO BECOME PURE DATA. IMMORTAL."

Sadie looked at the Ruby gem.

"Thorne," she whispered.

"SUBJECT 7," Rictus corrected. **"A BETA TESTER. A SOLDIER FROM THE FRONTIER WARS. HE DIDN'T VOLUNTEER. WE NEEDED A DURABLE MIND TO TEST THE COMPRESSION ALGORITHM. SOMEONE WHO COULD SURVIVE BEING ZIP-FILED INTO A GEMSTONE."**

Sadie felt sick. The nausea rolled in her stomach, acidic and hot.

"He’s not a hero," Sadie breathed. "He’s a prisoner."

"HE IS A FAILED UPLOAD," Rictus said coldly. **"THE COMPRESSION WORKED, BUT THE PERSONALITY FRAGMENTED. HE RETAINED TOO MUCH TRAUMA. TOO MUCH 'RAGE.' WE LABELLED HIM 'CORRUPTED' AND ARCHIVED HIM IN THE BASEMENT. UNTIL YOU FOUND HIM."**

Sadie pulled her hand away from the band as if it were burning.

She remembered her dream. The Auditor’s hand reaching down from the sky. The feeling of being filed away.

It wasn't a metaphor. It was a memory of the day Kegan—Rictus—had stolen Thorne’s life.

"And Valerius?" Sadie asked, her voice trembling. "Kaelen?"

"A PALADIN WHO ASKED TOO MANY QUESTIONS. A ROGUE WHO STOLE THE WRONG FILE." Rictus sighed, a sound like venting steam. **"THEY WEREN'T LEGENDS, SADIE. THEY WERE LOOSE ENDS. I TIED THEM UP."**

Sadie looked at the band. For years, she had worn it with pride. She had thought she was the chosen wielder of ancient spirits.

She was just a jailer carrying a hard drive full of victims.

"You monster," she whispered.

"I AM A VISIONARY," Rictus roared, slamming his fist against the cage. Dust rained down on them. **"I TRIED TO SAVE HUMANITY! I TRIED TO DIGITALIZE US BEFORE THE FLESH ROTTED! AND NOW... NOW I CAN FINISH THE WORK."**

The floating rocks groaned. Rictus was leaning closer, his massive form pressing against their prison.

"YOU THINK YOU CONTROL THEM," Rictus sneered. **"YOU THINK BECAUSE YOU WEAR THE BAND, YOU ARE THE MASTER. BUT YOU ARE JUST A USER, SADIE. AND USERS HAVE LIMITED PERMISSIONS."**

He paused.

"OVERRIDE: ADMIN."

It wasn't magic. It wasn't a spell. It was a command code, spoken with perfect, machine-like inflection.

Sadie screamed.

The iron band on her wrist turned white-hot instantly. It didn't melt; it constricted. It squeezed her wrist, crushing the bone, burning the skin.

"AUTHORIZATION: KEGAN-ALPHA-ZERO."

"Stop!" Sadie shrieked, clawing at the metal. "Get it off! Get it off!"

The band was trying to unlatch. The invisible seams were straining, pulling apart. But it was fused to her—soulbound. The conflict between the magic bond and the admin command was tearing her nerve endings apart.

"DISMOUNT," Rictus ordered.

FLASH.

A wave of red light exploded from the Ruby gem.

Thorne manifested inside the cage.

He didn't appear as a warrior ready for battle. He appeared on his knees, his iron form flickering and transparent. He was clutching his head, screaming in a voice that sounded like grinding metal.

"NO! NO! NOT THE BOX! NOT THE DARK!"

Thorne thrashed, his greatsword dissolving into red mist. He looked up. He saw the gap in the rocks. He saw the giant blue eye of Rictus staring in.

"CREATOR?" Thorne whispered. The word was filled with a centuries-old terror.

"HELLO, SUBJECT 7," Rictus purred. **"YOUR DURABILITY TEST IS COMPLETE. PLEASE RETURN TO THE SOURCE."**

Thorne turned. He looked at Sadie.

Sadie was curled on the ground, clutching her burning wrist. Tears streamed down her soot-stained face.

Thorne looked at the band. He looked at the woman he had called "Partner."

His eyes—burning red orbs—dimmed.

"YOU..." Thorne rumbled. **"YOU ARE... ONE OF THEM?"**

"No!" Sadie cried, reaching out to him. "Thorne, no! I didn't know! I swear!"

"YOU USE THE TOOL," Thorne’s voice broke. It was the sound of a heart breaking, heavy and metallic. **"YOU CHECK THE STATS. YOU SPEND THE MANA. YOU... ARE... ADMIN."**

He backed away from her, pressing himself against the rock wall of the cage. He looked at her not with anger, but with revulsion.

"I THOUGHT WE WERE BROKEN TOGETHER," Thorne whispered. **"BUT YOU HOLD THE LEASH."**

Sadie felt something inside her chest snap. It hurt more than the broken arm. It hurt more than the burns.

It was the truth.

She *had* used him. She *had* treated him like an item. Even when she saved him, she had done it because she needed his power. She was the Treasurer. He was the Asset.

"I'm sorry," Sadie sobbed. "Thorne, please... I'm sorry."

The heat in the band subsided. Rictus chuckled.

"SENTIMENT," Rictus scoffed. **"IT ALWAYS CORRUPTS THE DATA."**

The rocks of the cage shifted. A gap opened—wide enough for a person to walk through.

Rictus stood there. He was fully transformed now. A towering giant of glitch-matter, pulsing with the violet energy of the canyon. He looked like a god made of trash.

He extended a massive hand, palm up.

"A PROPOSAL, TREASURER."

Sadie looked up, wiping the tears and soot from her face.

"I DON'T JUST WANT TO EAT THEM," Rictus said, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. **"I WANT TO USE THEM. THE TREASURY... IT IS A SERVER. A PORTABLE REALITY ENGINE."**

He pointed to the **Bleeding Canyon**.

"THE WORLD IS BROKEN, SADIE. THE PHYSICS ARE LOOSE. THE CODE IS ROT."

He gestured to himself.

"BUT I CAN FIX IT. IF I HAVE THE SOURCE CODE. IF I HAVE THE PRIME SOULS TO PATCH THE HOLE. I CAN REWRITE THE LAWS. I CAN BRING BACK THE SYSTEM. MY SYSTEM."

He looked at Jax, broken and dying in the dirt. He looked at Torque, powered down. He looked at Gubbins, shivering in fear.

"GIVE ME THE BAND," Rictus offered. **"TRANSFER OWNERSHIP VOLUNTARILY. BREAK THE SOULBIND. AND I WILL UPLOAD THEM."**

Sadie blinked. "What?"

"YOUR FRIENDS," Rictus said. **"THEY ARE DYING. THEY ARE OBSOLETE. BUT IN MY NEW WORLD... I CAN MAKE THEM NPCS. ESSENTIAL NPCS. IMMORTAL. SAFE. THEY WILL LIVE IN THE CITY I BUILD. NO PAIN. NO HUNGER."**

He leaned closer.

"ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS GIVE ME THE FAILED EXPERIMENTS. GIVE ME THE GHOSTS. AND YOU SAVE THE LIVING."

Sadie looked at Jax. The tank was barely breathing. He wouldn't survive the night.

She looked at Thorne. The spirit was huddled in the corner, flickering, staring at her with betrayal.

Rictus was offering her a way out. A way to save the people she loved.

All she had to do was sell the slaves back to their master.

"A patch," Sadie whispered.

"A REBOOT," Rictus corrected. **"A NEW GAME PLUS."**

Sadie stood up. Her legs shook. She cradled her burning wrist against her chest.

She looked at Thorne.

"You said I hold the leash," Sadie whispered to the spirit.

Thorne didn't answer. He just watched her, his red eyes dull.

Sadie turned to Rictus. She walked to the opening of the cage.

"If I give it to you," Sadie asked, her voice flat, dead. "You promise? Safe? Immortal?"

"HARD-CODED," Rictus promised, his glitch-eyes swirling. **"I NEVER BREAK A CONTRACT."**

Sadie nodded slowly. She reached for the clasp of the iron band—the one Rictus said didn't exist, but she knew was there. The one that only opened if the Wielder *chose* to let go.

"Sadie, don't," Jax wheezed from the ground. "Don't... do it."

Sadie didn't look back.

"I'm a Treasurer, Jax," she said softly. "I know the value of a trade."

She stepped out of the cage, walking toward the monster, her hand on the iron shackle that held three souls in the dark.

Chapter 19

The distance between the rock cage and the monster was fifty feet.

It was the longest walk of Sadie Miller's life.

The violet dust of the **Bleeding Canyon** swirled around her ankles, clinging to her boots like grabbing hands. The air smelled of ozone and scorched sugar—the scent of magic rotting in the sun.

Sadie didn't limp. She dragged.

Her right arm, splinted with plastic and rags, was a dead weight against her chest. The pain had moved past agony into a dull, rhythmic thumping that echoed in her ears like a war drum.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She didn't look back.

She knew what was behind her. Jax, grey-faced and dying in the dirt. Torque, powered down, a silent statue of rust and chrome. Gubbins, shivering and small, hiding his face in his hands.

If she turned around, she would break. If she saw Jax's eyes—those loyal, trusting eyes—she would try to fight. And if she fought, they died.

"It's just a trade," Sadie whispered to herself. Her lips were cracked and dry. "It's just asset liquidation. You do it every day."

But she had never sold people before.

Ahead of her, **Rictus** loomed. He was a mountain of glitching trash, thirty feet of twisted girders, server blades, and grey flesh. He sat cross-legged on the canyon floor, blocking the only exit, like a Buddha made of nightmares.

His eyes—massive, glowing screens of blue code—watched her approach. He looked patient. He looked inevitable.

Sadie stopped ten feet away. She was in his shadow. The temperature dropped.

"SMART GIRL," Rictus rumbled. His voice didn't come from a mouth; it vibrated from the chest cavity where the wreckage of the Siphon glowed violet. **"YOU DID THE MATH."**

"I did the math," Sadie rasped. She felt small. Level 0. "The odds are zero."

"THE ODDS ARE ALWAYS ZERO FOR THE USER," Rictus agreed softly. **"THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS. AND I AM THE HOUSE."**

He lowered a massive hand. It was a chaotic mess of cables and rebar, the fingers tipped with jagged glass. He held it palm up, waiting.

"SHOW ME THE GOODS."

Sadie hesitated. Her hand hovered over the iron band on her left wrist.

"You promised," she said. Her voice was thin, pleading. "Safe. Immortal."

"I AM AN ARCHITECT," Rictus said. **"I BUILD SYSTEMS. LET ME SHOW YOU THE PATCH NOTES."**

A beam of light shot from his eye. It hit the violet dust between them, projecting a hologram.

It was a window into a world.

Sadie stared at it.

She saw a city of gold. Not the fake, dangerous gold of the Upper City, but warm, soft light. She saw a tavern.

She saw Jax. He wasn't bleeding. He wasn't broken. He was wearing shining armor, sitting at a table, laughing. He raised a tankard of ale.

She saw Torque. He was whole. No cybernetics. Just a massive, healthy Orc working at a forge, hammering hot steel with a smile on his face.

She saw Gubbins. He was surrounded by machines that worked, gadgets that didn't explode. He looked happy.

"SAFE MODE," Rictus whispered. **"NO MOBS. NO HUNGER. NO DURABILITY LOSS. THEY LOOP THROUGH A PERFECT DAY, FOREVER."**

Sadie watched the hologram. Jax laughed again. It was the same laugh. The exact same animation, repeating every four seconds.

It was fake. It was hollow. They were just code executing a script.

But they were alive.

"They won't know?" Sadie asked. "They won't know they're trapped?"

"DOES THE CHARACTER KNOW HE IS IN A GAME?" Rictus asked gently. **"IGNORANCE IS THE ULTIMATE BUFF, SADIE. I AM OFFERING THEM PARADISE."**

Sadie looked at the real Jax, lying in the dirt behind her. He coughed, a wet, rattling sound that meant his lungs were filling with fluid.

Pain versus the Loop.

Truth versus Safety.

Sadie closed her eyes. She was so tired. She was tired of the dust. Tired of the fear. Tired of checking her inventory and finding it empty.

"Take them," Sadie whispered. "Put them in the box."

"AND THE PAYMENT?" Rictus asked. He wiggled his glass fingers. **"THE SOURCE CODE."**

Sadie looked at her wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was cold.

Thorne was still there. Or rather, his ghost was. A faint red shimmer hung in the air beside her.

He wasn't raging. He wasn't the Berserker who had cracked the machine. He was just a man in broken armor, standing with his head bowed.

"Thorne," Sadie whispered.

He didn't look at her. He looked at Rictus. He looked at his creator.

"HE IS RIGHT," Thorne said. His voice was a rusted whisper. **"WE ARE... DATA."**

"You're not data," Sadie said, tears spilling over her cheeks. "You're my friend."

"FRIENDS DO NOT HAVE OWNERS," Thorne said.

He turned to face her. His eyes—those burning red coals—were dim.

"YOU OPENED THE CAGE ONCE, SADIE. BUT YOU NEVER TOOK OFF THE COLLAR."

Sadie choked on a sob. "I didn't know how."

"IT DOES NOT MATTER," Thorne said. He began to fade. **"THE ADMIN COMMAND IS GIVEN. I RETURN TO STORAGE."**

He didn't fight. He didn't make her force him. He simply dissolved.

The red mist was sucked back into the Ruby gem.

CLICK.

The gem went dark. A lifeless, grey stone in a rusted setting.

He had given up too. He had accepted that he was just a glitch to be patched.

Sadie felt a hole open in her chest. It was wider than the canyon.

"He surrendered," Sadie realized. "Because of me. Because I broke him."

She was the villain. Rictus was the monster, but she was the one who had broken the spirit's will.

She deserved to lose.

Sadie walked the last few steps. She stood at the tips of Rictus’s giant metal fingers.

She lifted her left arm.

Her hand shook so hard she could barely touch the clasp. It was a small mechanism on the inside of the band—the physical release. Rictus had been right. It was there. She had just never looked for it because she never wanted to let go.

"YES," Rictus hissed, leaning closer. The heat from his body was suffocating. **"OPEN IT. UNZIP THE FILE."**

Sadie fumbled with the latch. Her fingers were slippery with sweat and blood.

"It's stuck," she panicked. "I can't... I can't do it."

"USE YOUR TEETH IF YOU HAVE TO," Rictus commanded. **"DON'T KEEP PARADISE WAITING."**

Sadie clawed at her own wrist. She scratched her skin raw.

Click.

A small sound. Louder than thunder in the silence of the canyon.

The pressure released.

The **Soulbound Treasury**—the artifact she had worn since Level 1, the item that defined her existence—popped open.

It hung loose on her wrist.

Sadie stared at it. It looked like trash. Just a heavy ring of iron with three dull stones.

She slid it off her hand.

Her wrist felt naked. Light. Wrong.

She held the band in her palm. It was heavy with the weight of three souls. Valerius. Kaelen. Thorne.

She was holding them. She was holding their lives, their memories, their pain.

And she was about to give them to a man who would drink them like wine.

"Will it hurt?" Sadie asked. Her voice was a child’s whisper. "When you... process them?"

Rictus smiled. His teeth were jagged shards of white metal.

"PAIN IS A SIGNAL," Rictus lied. **"I WILL TURN OFF THE SIGNAL. IT WILL BE... INSTANT. FORMAT C:."**

He lied. Sadie knew he lied. She had seen the machine. She had seen the Glitch-Wolf shrivel.

But she nodded. She needed the lie. She wrapped it around herself like a blanket.

"Instant," she repeated. "Okay."

She stepped forward.

She reached up to place the band in the monster’s hand.

"Sadie."

The voice was faint. Wet.

She froze.

She didn't turn around. She couldn't.

"Sadie... don't."

It was Jax.

He must have dragged himself. He must have crawled through the dirt on his broken elbows.

"Don't... sell us," Jax wheezed.

Sadie squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm saving you, Jax. Look at the hologram. You're happy."

"That’s not me," Jax rasped. "That’s a doll."

She heard him cough—a terrible, fluid sound.

"I'd rather die... as a tank," Jax whispered. "Than live... as a mob."

Sadie trembled. The iron band shook in her hand.

"IGNORE THE GLITCH," Rictus boomed. **"HE IS CORRUPTED. HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE WANTS. GIVE IT TO ME."**

Rictus moved his hand closer. The glass fingers brushed Sadie's palm.

"I can't save you any other way!" Sadie screamed at the ground. "I have nothing! I am nothing!"

"You're... the Treasurer," Jax whispered.

"The Treasurer is broke!" Sadie yelled. She opened her eyes. She looked at the band.

"I'm bankrupt, Jax. I'm in the red. This is the only asset I have left to liquidate."

She looked up at Rictus.

"Take it," she sobbed. "Just take it and end it."

She fell to her knees. Her legs gave out. She slumped into the violet dust, holding the band up like an offering to a cruel god.

She bowed her head. She waited for the weight to be gone.

She waited for the darkness.

"EXCELLENT," Rictus purred.

His massive fingers closed around the band. He lifted it from her palm.

Sadie felt the loss instantly. It was a physical coldness that started in her wrist and shot straight to her heart.

She was empty.

She didn't look up. She stayed on her knees, staring at the violet dust, waiting for the "Safe Mode" to start. Waiting for the loop.

She had given up.

Chapter 20

The silence in the **Bleeding Canyon** was absolute.

It wasn't the quiet of peace. It was the quiet of a grave after the dirt has settled.

Sadie Miller knelt in the violet dust, her head bowed, her empty left hand resting on her knee. The skin where the **Soulbound Treasury** had sat for years was pale, indented, and raw. It felt lighter than air, but her arm felt heavy, as if the ghost of the iron was still dragging it down.

Fifty feet above her, **Rictus** held the band up to the toxic sun.

The Glitch-King was humming again. That same, mindless, looping tune from the loading screen. He turned the iron ring over in his massive, cable-knit fingers, inspecting it like a jeweler inspecting a diamond.

"BEAUTIFUL," Rictus purred, his voice vibrating the canyon walls. **"THE COMPRESSION RATIO IS FLAWLESS. I CAN FEEL THEM IN THERE. LIKE BUGS IN AMBER."**

He looked down at Sadie.

"DO NOT WORRY, TREASURER. THE UPLOAD QUEUE IS PROCESSING. YOUR FRIENDS WILL BE IN 'PARADISE' SHORTLY. I JUST NEED TO... INTEGRATE THE HARDWARE FIRST."

He didn't upload them. He didn't heal Jax. He didn't fix Torque.

He just played with his new toy.

Sadie stared at the ground. She didn't have the energy to be angry. She didn't have the energy to breathe. She had made the deal. She had sold her soul to save their lives. Why didn't she feel saved?

"He’s lying."

The voice was a wet, grinding rasp.

Sadie didn't turn. "Be quiet, Torque."

"He’s lying," the Warlord repeated.

There was a sound of metal dragging through dirt. *Scrape. Clunk. Wheeze.*

Torque was crawling toward her.

The Orc looked like a wreck salvaged from a scrapyard fire. His left arm was gone, the stump wrapped in oily rags. His chest plate—the housing for the Golem-Drive—was cracked open, revealing the spinning turbine beneath. Green light leaked from the fissure, pulsing erratically.

He dragged himself through the dust until he was next to her. He smelled of burnt oil, dried blood, and stabilizer fluid.

"He isn't going to upload us," Torque wheezed, spitting a glob of black fluid into the sand. "He’s going to eat the band. And then he’s going to step on us to test his new boots."

"He promised," Sadie whispered. Tears dripped from her nose, making dark spots in the violet dust. "Hard-coded. He said."

"And you believed a dev?" Torque let out a sharp, barking laugh that turned into a cough. "Sadie... you're smarter than that. You're a Rat."

"I'm nothing!" Sadie screamed.

She snapped her head up, glaring at the Warlord. Her face was a mask of soot and snot.

"Look at me, Torque! I’m Level 0! I have 8 Strength! I have no gold! I have no magic! I’m just a girl in a coat!"

She gestured wildly at the giant monster looming over them.

"He’s a god! He rewrites reality! What was I supposed to do? Fight him with a rock? I made the trade! I saved you!"

"You surrendered," Torque corrected. His voice was low, dangerous. "You didn't trade. You quit."

He reached out with his remaining hand—the organic one—and grabbed her chin. His grip was weak, trembling, but his skin was rough and warm. He forced her to look at him.

His organic eye was clouded with pain. But his mechanical eye... it was burning.

"Do you know how I lost my arm, Treasurer?"

Sadie blinked, startled by the question. "The grenade. Just now."

"No," Torque shook his head. "The other one. The first one."

He tapped his mechanical shoulder with his chin.

"I was Level 10. A grunt. We were fighting the Sand-Drakes in the Southern Wastes. My warband was wiped out. My captain ran. My healer logged out."

He leaned closer.

"A drake bit my arm off. Right at the shoulder. I lay in the mud for three days. No potions. No mana. Just me and the flies."

Sadie stared at him. "How did you survive?"

"I got angry," Torque whispered. "I realized that the System didn't care if I died. The Guild didn't care. The gods didn't care. So I had to care."

He released her chin. He pointed at Rictus.

"I didn't have a weapon. So I used a rock. I didn't have an arm. So I built one out of scrap. I didn't have a class. So I became a Warlord."

He looked at the hologram flickering near Rictus's foot—the image of the "Safe Mode" city where the looping Jax was drinking his looping ale.

"That isn't life, Sadie," Torque spat. "That's a waiting room. A cage with gold bars. I would rather die screaming in this dirt than live forever in a

loop where I can't feel the weight of my own axe."

"But Jax..." Sadie choked. "He’s dying."

"Then let him die like a Tank," Torque growled. "On his feet. protecting his party. Don't insult him by turning him into a decorative NPC."

Sadie looked over at Jax.

The big man was unconscious, his breathing shallow. But his hand... his hand was gripping his rusted iron pipe. Even in his sleep, he was ready to swing.

"I can't fight him," Sadie whispered, looking back at Rictus. "Torque, look at him. He’s the Admin. He has the codes."

"So change the code," Torque said.

He shifted his weight. The Golem-Drive in his chest whined louder. The green light intensified, shining through the cracks in his armor.

"My core," Torque said, tapping his chest. "It’s running on the pure blue stabilizer you dropped. It’s overcharged. I have... maybe 120% output."

Sadie wiped her eyes. "So? You can't shoot him. You have no shells."

"I'm not the weapon, Sadie," Torque said softly. "I'm the battery."

He looked at Rictus’s hand. The monster was distracted, trying to fit the Treasury band onto his massive finger. It was too small. He was frowning, reshaping his own flesh to make it fit.

"The band," Torque said. "It’s iron. Iron conducts."

He looked at Sadie.

"If you touch it... and I touch you... I can dump the core. All of it. Directly into the circuit."

Sadie’s eyes went wide. "Torque... that’s a Kinetic Dump. It would stop your heart. It would burn you out."

"I'm already burned out," Torque smiled. It was a gruesome, jagged smile, full of blood and grit. "I'm running on fumes and spite, Treasurer. Let me spend it on something that matters."

"You'll die," Sadie whispered.

"I'll crash," Torque corrected. "But you... you'll reboot."

He grabbed her hand. His grip tightened.

"You aren't the Treasurer because you have gold, Sadie. You're the Treasurer because you know the value of things."

He nodded toward the band high above them.

"What is the value of a soul? Is it data? Or is it the thing that refuses to be deleted?"

Sadie looked at the band.

She thought of Thorne, surrendering to the darkness because she had given up. She thought of Valerius and Kaelen, silent in their prisons.

She thought of the audit.

She wasn't Level 0. She was Sadie Miller. And Sadie Miller didn't accept bad deals.

"He has it," Sadie said, her voice trembling. "He’s holding it."

"He’s arrogant," Torque said. "He thinks you're broken. He thinks I'm scrap. He isn't watching us."

Torque shifted his legs, digging his heels into the sand.

"I can throw you," Torque said. "One arm. One throw. I can get you to his knee. You climb the rest."

"And if he catches me?"

"Then we die together," Torque said. "Loudly."

Sadie looked at the Warlord. She saw the green fire in his chest. She saw the absolute, terrifying resolve in his one good eye.

She took a deep breath. The air tasted of ozone, but it also tasted of stabilizer fluid.

It tasted like a chance.

"Okay," Sadie whispered.

She stood up.

Her legs were shaky. Her right arm screamed in protest. But she stood.

She looked at Rictus. The monster was busy molding his finger, focused entirely on the ring.

"Hey!" Sadie shouted.

Rictus paused. He looked down, his massive blue eyes narrowing.

"STILL HERE?" Rictus rumbled. **"GO SIT IN THE CORNER, TREASURER. THE UPLOAD IS PENDING."**

"I have a question," Sadie called out, walking toward him. She kept her pace slow, non-threatening.

"QUERY?" Rictus sighed. **"MAKE IT QUICK."**

"You said you wrote the code," Sadie said, stepping over a pile of rubble. She was ten feet away. "You said you created the Soulbound class."

"I DID."

"Did you write a contingency for user error?" Sadie asked.

She was five feet away. She crouched down next to Torque, who was coiled like a spring in the dust.

"USERS ALWAYS MAKE ERRORS," Rictus scoffed. **"THAT IS WHY I REMOVED THE USER."**

"Wrong," Sadie whispered.

She stepped onto Torque’s hand.

"Torque," she said. "Launch."

Torque roared.

It wasn't a scream of pain. It was a scream of defiance. The Golem-Drive in his chest flared white-hot. The servos in his remaining arm whined to their breaking point.

He heaved.

Sadie flew.

She launched into the air, soaring past Rictus’s knee, past his waist. She wasn't flying; she was falling upward, propelled by the last desperate strength of a dying Orc.

Rictus’s eyes went wide.

"WHAT—"

Sadie reached the hand.

She didn't aim for Rictus. She aimed for the iron.

She slammed into his massive, cable-knit palm. Her good hand closed around the **Soulbound Treasury**.

"Torque!" Sadie screamed. "NOW!"

Below her, Torque didn't hesitate. He slammed his hand into the wet earth. He discharged the core.

ZZZZZ-RAK.

A bolt of pure, green kinetic energy shot from his chest. It traveled through the ground, up Rictus’s leg, through his body.

It wasn't an attack. It was a connection.

The energy hit Sadie.

It didn't burn her. It passed through her. It flowed from Torque, through the ground, through the monster, into Sadie, and straight into the iron band she was clutching.

It was a jumpstart. A defibrillator shock to the heart of the system.

The Treasury flared.

It didn't glow red. Or amber. Or black.

It glowed **White**.

"UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS!" Rictus shrieked, trying to shake her off. **"SYSTEM ERROR! VOLTAGE SPIKE!"**

Sadie held on. The band seared her palm. She felt the souls inside wake up. Not gently. Violently.

She felt Thorne’s rage. She felt Valerius’s honor. She felt Kaelen’s shadow.

And she felt Torque’s grit.

"Wake up!" Sadie screamed into the iron. "Wake up and fight!"

The band pulsed. A shockwave of white light exploded outward, knocking Rictus’s hand open.

Sadie fell. But she didn't hit the ground.

She landed in a crouch, the band clutched tight in her fist.

She looked up.

Rictus was staggering back, smoke pouring from his eyes. The surge had blinded him.

"YOU BROKE THE PORT!" Rictus howled. **"YOU FRIED THE INPUT!"**

Sadie stood up. She slid the band back onto her wrist.

It clicked.

LOCK.

The sound was heavy. Final.

She looked at Torque. The Warlord lay face down in the dirt. His chest was dark. The green light was gone.

"Torque?" Sadie whispered.

He didn't move.

Sadie felt a tear slide down her cheek. But it wasn't a tear of despair. It was a tear of fuel.

She looked at the band. The three gems were glowing. They weren't just active. They were Overcharged.

"WIELDER," Valerius's voice boomed in her mind. **"WE ARE... AWAKE."**

"AND WE ARE ANGRY," Thorne added.

Sadie turned to Rictus. The monster was rebooting, his eyes flickering back to life.

"You wanted the Source Code, Kegan?" Sadie asked, her voice cold as the grave.

She raised her fist. The white light of the overcharge engulfed her, turning her silhouette into a blinding star against the violet canyon.

"Here it comes."

Chapter 21

The light wasn't warm. It was loud.

Sadie Miller stood in the center of the amphitheater, her left arm raised, engulfed in a blinding, roaring whiteness. The **Soulbound Treasury** wasn't just active; it was screaming. The energy Torque had dumped into the circuit—the raw, kinetic life-force of a dying Warlord—was tearing through the iron band, bypassing every safety regulator and limiter Kegan had ever coded.

Sadie's skin felt like it was blistering, but she didn't pull away. She clamped her hand into a fist, locking the circuit.

"ADMIN_OVERRIDE!" Rictus shrieked, stumbling back. He shielded his massive blue eyes with a hand made of twisted rebar. **"SYSTEM HALT! ERROR 404! STOP!"**

He was spamming commands. In the old world, the band would have clicked off instantly. The System always obeyed the Admin.

But the System was gone. And this wasn't code. This was voltage.

"Your password expired," Sadie grit out, her teeth clenched against the power surging through her nerves.

She looked down at Torque. The Orc lay face down in the violet dust, motionless. The green light in his chest was dark. He was empty. A spent casing.

A cold, hard knot of grief formed in Sadie's throat, but she swallowed it down. She shoved it into the furnace of the band.

Fuel, she thought. *It's all fuel.*

She looked up at the Glitch-King.

"You wanted to see the upload?" Sadie whispered.

The white light on her wrist split into three distinct beams—Amber, Obsidian, and Ruby. They didn't shoot out like lasers; they poured out like liquid fire, pooling on the ground around her.

"IMPOSSIBLE," Rictus boomed, recovering his composure. He stood to his full height, thirty feet of glitching scrap and flesh. **"THE BANDWIDTH CANNOT SUPPORT SIMULTANEOUS MANIFESTATION! YOU WILL BURN OUT YOUR NEURAL PATHWAYS!"**

"Watch me," Sadie said.

The pools of light rose. They solidified.

To her left, **Valerius** formed. He wasn't the shining, polished knight of the game. His armor was cracked, revealing blinding white light underneath. His shield was gone, replaced by a barrier of pure force that shimmered like heat haze.

To her right, **Kaelen** coalesced from the shadows. He didn't look like a rogue. He looked like a void—a silhouette cut out of the world, edged in Torque's green energy. He held daggers that dripped static.

And in the center, towering over Sadie, was **Thorne**.

The Berserker didn't roar. He didn't posture. He stood absolutely still, his greatsword resting on the ground. He looked solid. Heavy. Real. His red eyes locked onto Rictus with a hatred that felt centuries old.

Sadie felt their presence in her mind. It wasn't the neat, organized HUD of the past. It was a cacophony. Valerius's duty, Kaelen's cold calculation, Thorne's rage—all screaming at once. It felt like her skull was splitting open.

She didn't try to silence them. She synchronized.

"We are the raid," Sadie whispered.

She pointed at the monster.

"Clear the trash."

Rictus laughed. It was a sound like tearing metal, amplified by the canyon walls.

"A GLITCH CANNOT KILL THE ARCHITECT!"

He raised his arms. The canyon answered.

Violet lightning crackled along the walls. Massive boulders, suspended by the glitch-field, tore themselves free and began to orbit him. He was a planet of garbage, pulling everything into his gravity well.

"DELETE," Rictus commanded.

He threw a hand forward. A boulder the size of a house shot toward Sadie. It broke the sound barrier, screaming through the air.

Sadie didn't move. She didn't flinch.

"Valerius," she said softly.

The Paladin stepped forward. He didn't raise a shield. He didn't brace himself.

He punched.

CRACK.

Valerius’s fist met the boulder in mid-air. There was no explosion of dust. The rock simply ceased to exist. It shattered into a million points of light, dissolving against the barrier of his will.

"I AM THE BULWARK," Valerius’s voice boomed. It wasn't a catchphrase. It was a statement of fact. **"AND THE WALL DOES NOT MOVE."**

Rictus blinked, his blue eyes widening.

"PHYSICS ERROR," Rictus muttered. **"IMPACT CALCULATION FAILED."**

"Kaelen," Sadie ordered. "Flank."

The shadow vanished.

Rictus spun around, searching the air. **"SENSORS! TRACK THE ROGUE!"**

He couldn't track him. Kaelen wasn't in the air. He was in the code.

Cuts appeared on Rictus's legs. Deep, gashing wounds that severed hydraulic lines and cables. Black oil sprayed across the sand. Kaelen was moving too fast to see, flickering in and out of reality, dissecting the monster from the ankles up.

"PEST!" Rictus roared. He slammed his foot down, creating a shockwave of violet energy that rippled across the amphitheater.

"Jump!" Sadie yelled.

Kaelen appeared beside her, grabbing her waist.

The world blurred.

Sadie's stomach lurched as they teleported. One second she was on the ground; the next, she was standing on a floating slab of rock, twenty feet in the air.

She fell to her knees, dry heaving. The motion sickness was instant and brutal.

"Warning next time," she gasped, wiping bile from her mouth.

She looked down. From this vantage point, she could see Rictus perfectly. The monster was thrashing, trying to crush Valerius, who stood immovable in the center of the storm.

But Sadie wasn't looking at the fight. She was looking at the monster's chest.

Buried deep in the mass of twisted metal and flesh, glowing with a sickly violet light, was the **Siphon**. The machine Rictus had absorbed. It was the core. The CPU.

"Thorne!" Sadie screamed over the noise. "The chest! Crack the shell!"

Thorne didn't need to be told twice.

The Berserker charged. He didn't run; he rocketed forward, leaving a trail of red light.

Rictus saw him coming.

"NO!" The monster panicked. He ripped a crane arm from his own shoulder and swung it like a club.

Thorne slid. He dropped to his knees, sliding under the massive swing. Sparks flew as his armor scraped the rock.

He sprang up, propelling himself off Rictus's knee. He was airborne.

"SUNDER!"

Thorne brought the greatsword down.

CLANG.

The blade hit Rictus's chest plate—a wall of reinforced server racks.

Metal screamed. Sparks showered the canyon. The plate buckled, tearing open a gash three feet wide.

Violet light bled out.

"ERROR! BREACH DETECTED!" Rictus shrieked. He backhanded Thorne, sending the spirit flying into the canyon wall.

Thorne hit the stone with a sickening crunch. He fell to the ground, his iron form flickering.

"Regenerating!" Sadie warned.

She watched in horror as the canyon walls seemed to flow *into* Rictus. Rocks, dust, and debris flew toward the wound in his chest, knitting themselves together. The gash sealed up in seconds.

"He has the whole canyon on auto-repair," Sadie realized. "We can't out-damage him. He has infinite health."

She looked at her wrist. The white light of the band was dimming. Torque's charge wasn't infinite. They were burning fuel fast.

"We need a crit," Sadie whispered. "We need something that breaks the cycle."

She looked at Valerius, standing firm below. She looked at Thorne, shaking off the impact.

In the game, you couldn't combine assets. A Paladin was a shield. A Berserker was a sword. They had different hitboxes, different cooldowns. You couldn't make them interact.

But Rictus had said the physics were loose.

"Valerius!" Sadie shouted from her perch. "Formation Alpha!"

Valerius looked up. **"I DO NOT KNOW THAT FORMATION, WIELDER."**

"Improvise!" Sadie yelled. "Thorne! Pick him up!"

Thorne looked at the Paladin. **"THE TIN MAN IS HEAVY."**

"Throw him!" Sadie screamed. "Throw him like a spear!"

Rictus was charging his chest laser. The violet light in the Siphon was building to a crescendo.

"FORMATTING IN 3... 2..."

Thorne roared. He grabbed Valerius by the belt and the neck.

Valerius didn't resist. He understood. He tucked his limbs in, turning his body into a rigid projectile. His aura flared, turning him into a missile of pure white light.

Thorne spun. Once. Twice. Gathering momentum.

"FLY, LITTLE MAN!"

Thorne released.

Valerius shot through the air. He broke the sound barrier.

BOOM.

He hit Rictus dead center in the chest.

It wasn't a cut. It was a puncture.

Valerius drove straight through the regenerating armor, burying himself deep into the monster’s torso.

Rictus choked. The violet light in his chest sputtered and died.

"CRITICAL FAILURE," Rictus gasped, clutching his chest. **"FOREIGN OBJECT... IN THE DRIVE."**

The monster staggered back, pinned by the holy light burning inside him. He slammed into the canyon wall and slid down, pinned like a butterfly in a display case.

Sadie cheered. She raised her fist.

Then, she heard the snap.

CRACK.

Pain shot up her left arm.

Sadie screamed, clutching her wrist. The iron band was vibrating violently.

"Feedback," she gasped. "Too much resonance."

She looked at the band. A hairline fracture had appeared in the iron, right between the Amber and Ruby settings.

"It’s breaking," Sadie whispered. "The overcharge is tearing it apart."

She looked down. Rictus was pinned, but he wasn't dead. His massive hands were clawing at his chest, trying to dig Valerius out. The canyon was shaking as he drew more power, trying to force a reboot.

"He's going to heal," Sadie said. "He’s going to eject Valerius and heal."

She stood up on the floating rock. She swayed, dizzy with pain and exhaustion.

"I have to end it," she said. "Now."

"Kaelen," Sadie whispered. "Get me down there."

The rogue spirit appeared beside her. He looked faded, his edges blurring into smoke.

"THE PATH IS DANGEROUS, SADIE. THE MONSTER IS LEAKING CODE."

"Drop me on his head," Sadie ordered.

Kaelen nodded. He grabbed her.

They teleported.

Sadie materialized on top of Rictus's shoulder.

The heat was unbearable. It felt like standing on the hood of a running car engine. Violet sparks arced around her, stinging her skin.

Below her, Rictus was thrashing. His massive hands were digging into his own chest, ripping out chunks of metal to get to Valerius.

"GET OUT!" Rictus shrieked. **"GET OUT OF MY KERNEL!"**

Sadie looked at the Siphon core. It was exposed now—a pulsing, glass sphere buried deep in the meat and metal. It was cracked, leaking liquid magic.

"Thorne," Sadie called out.

The Berserker stood below, looking up at her. He was barely visible, a ghost of red dust.

"I CANNOT REACH HIM, SADIE. I AM SPENT."

"I don't need you to reach him," Sadie said. She raised her left hand. The iron band was white-hot, burning into her bone.

"I need you to reach *me*."

Thorne froze. **"NO. POSSESSION IS FORBIDDEN. IT BURNS THE VESSEL."**

"The vessel is already cracked, Thorne!" Sadie yelled. "Look at me! I'm broken! We don't have time for safety protocols!"

Rictus let out a roar of triumph. He had a grip on Valerius. He began to pull the Paladin out of his chest.

"He’s rebooting!" Sadie screamed. "Thorne! Get in the gear!"

It was an old phrase. A gamer phrase. *Get in the gear.* Equip the item.

But this time, Sadie was the item.

Thorne looked at her. He saw the fire in her eyes. He saw the absolute refusal to lose.

He dissolved.

The red cloud rushed upward. It didn't go into the band. It went into Sadie.

GASP.

Sadie arched her back.

It felt like drinking molten lead.

Thorne’s rage flooded her veins. His strength replaced her weakness. Her broken arm cracked and straightened, held together by spectral iron. Her eyes rolled back, turning glowing red.

She wasn't Sadie anymore. She wasn't Thorne.

She was the **Hammer**.

Rictus looked up. He saw the girl standing on his shoulder.

She wasn't Level 0.

A red aura exploded around her, forming the silhouette of a massive, horned helmet.

"GAME OVER, KEGAN," Sadie’s voice boomed. It was layered, a chorus of girl and ghost.

She didn't use a sword. She clenched her fist. The iron band fused with the spectral armor, becoming a gauntlet of solid light.

She jumped.

She dove straight into the open wound in Rictus’s chest.

Chapter 22

The heat inside the monster was absolute.

It wasn't the heat of a fire; it was the heat of a processor running at a million degrees. It smelled of melting copper and ozone.

Sadie Miller, encased in the spectral red armor of the **Berserker**, fell through the air. She was a missile of pure rage, aiming for the glowing violet sun in the center of Rictus's chest.

"BREAK!" she screamed. The voice was hers, layered with Thorne's metallic roar.

She clenched her fist. The iron band on her wrist pulsed with blinding white light. She put everything she had—every ounce of Torque's kinetic charge, every shred of Thorne's hate—into the swing.

She hit the **Siphon Core**.

CLANG.

The sound was wrong.

It shouldn't have clanged. It should have smashed. It should have shattered like cheap glass.

Instead, her fist hit something harder than diamond. The violet sphere didn't crack. It rippled.

The kinetic energy of the punch didn't explode outward. It was sucked inward. The core drank the force of the blow. The white light of the Treasury band was pulled into the violet vortex, turning from a weapon into a snack.

"ERROR," Thorne's voice whispered in her mind. **"DAMAGE NEGATED."**

The ribcage of the monster slammed shut behind them.

Sadie was trapped.

The darkness was total, save for the sickly violet glow of the core she had failed to break. The air was thick, suffocating.

"DID YOU THINK IT WAS GLASS, SADIE?"

Rictus's voice echoed around her. It came from the walls of flesh and metal. It came from the floor. It came from inside her own head.

"IT IS A KERNEL. IT IS THE HEART OF THE SYSTEM. YOU CANNOT PUNCH MATH."

Sadie scrambled back, her spectral armor flickering. "Thorne! Hit it again! Harder!"

"I CANNOT," Thorne rumbled. **"THE ARMOR... IT IS STICKY."**

Sadie looked down.

From the walls of the chest cavity, black cables were uncoiling. They looked like intestines made of fiber-optic wire. They slithered toward her, wrapping around her legs, her arms, her throat.

They didn't burn. They felt cold. Numbing.

"Let me go!" Sadie screamed, thrashing. She tried to summon **The Sunderer**, but the sword wouldn't manifest.

"I TOLD YOU, TREASURER," Rictus purred. **"A FUSION IS A UNIQUE DATA SIGNATURE. WHEN YOU MERGED WITH THE ASSET, YOU MADE A MISTAKE. YOU PUT ALL YOUR FILES IN ONE FOLDER."**

The cables tightened.

"QUARANTINE PROTOCOL: INITIATED."

The pain began not in her body, but in her soul.

It felt like a hook had been inserted into the base of her spine and was pulling upward.

"NO!" Thorne roared. **"SHE IS NOT THE VESSEL! SHE IS THE PARTNER!"**

"SILENCE, ASSET," Rictus commanded.

The cables pulsed.

They weren't crushing Sadie. They were filtering her.

They dug into the spectral red armor. They latched onto the energy signature of the Berserker.

And they pulled.

Sadie screamed. It felt like her skin was being peeled off. It felt like her memories were being ripped out through her pores.

She saw Thorne's face in front of her—a mask of red static, terrified and screaming. He was being dragged backward, away from her.

"Hold on!" Sadie gasped, reaching out with her physical hand. She grabbed the red mist. "Thorne! Don't let go!"

"SADIE!" Thorne bellowed. **"THE ANCHOR IS BREAKING!"**

The connection snapped.

It was a physical sound. A wet, tearing noise like a muscle rupture.

The red armor shattered. The spectral light vanished.

Thorne was ripped out of her body. He was compressed into a tight, screaming ball of red light and sucked into the violet core.

Sadie was left alone in the dark. Cold. Naked. Level 0.

"EJECT," Rictus said.

The floor of the chest cavity opened.

Sadie fell.

She tumbled out of the monster’s chest, trailing smoke and sparks. She hit the canyon floor hard.

THUD.

She rolled, crashing into a pile of jagged rocks. Her splinted arm crunched against the stone. She didn't scream. She didn't have the breath.

She lay in the violet dust, staring up at the violet sky. Her vision swam.

Tick... tick...

A sound near her ear.

She tried to move her left arm. It felt light. Too light.

She looked at her wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was smoking. The iron was glowing a dull, angry cherry-red from the thermal shock of the extraction.

As the cool air of the canyon hit the superheated metal, physics took its toll.

PING.

A hairline fracture appeared on the band.

"No," Sadie whispered. Blood bubbled on her lips.

CRACK.

The sound was louder than the explosion. Louder than the roar of the monster.

The iron band snapped.

It broke cleanly in two. The tension that had held it together for centuries—the magic, the code, the will—was gone.

The two halves of the shackle fell from her wrist.

Clatter.

They hit the stone.

Then, the gems fell out.

The Amber stone rolled into the dirt. The Obsidian stone bounced and settled near a pebble. The Ruby stone—still warm—landed near Sadie's nose.

They were just rocks. Dull, lifeless rocks.

Sadie stared at them. She reached out a trembling hand. She touched the Ruby.

It was cold.

"Thorne?" she whispered.

There was no answer. No hum. No heat.

The Treasury was destroyed.

The ground shook.

BOOM. BOOM.

Heavy footsteps approached.

Sadie couldn't look up. She just watched the shadow fall over her. It was huge. It blocked out the toxic sun.

A massive hand—the one made of server racks and cables—reached down.

It didn't grab Sadie. It ignored her.

It picked up the gems.

Rictus plucked them from the dirt delicately, like a giant picking flowers. He held the three stones in his palm.

"CLEAN INSTALL," Rictus rumbled.

He stood up. He looked at the gems.

"VALERIUS. THE SHIELD."

He pressed the Amber stone into his chest, right next to the Siphon Core. The flesh rippled and swallowed the stone.

FLASH.

A wave of golden light washed over the monster. His chaotic, glitching armor smoothed out. The twisted scrap metal knitted together, forming a seamless, shining breastplate of gold and light.

"KAELEN. THE BLADE."

He pressed the Obsidian stone into his shoulder.

FWIP.

Shadows erupted from his back. They coalesced into massive, diaphanous wings of black smoke. He moved, and his form blurred, vibrating with supernatural speed.

"AND THORNE. THE ENGINE."

He pressed the Ruby stone into the center of his forehead.

ROAR.

Red lightning exploded from Rictus's body. His muscles—the grey, dead flesh—bulged, doubling in size. Red veins pumped fire through his limbs.

He wasn't a scavenger anymore. He wasn't a glitch.

He was a god.

He floated up into the air, suspended by the black wings, armored in gold, fueled by rage.

He spread his arms.

"SYSTEM RESTORED," Rictus announced. His voice was a chorus of four souls—his own, and the three he had consumed.

Sadie lay in the dirt. She watched him ascend.

She felt... nothing.

No anger. No fear. Just a vast, empty silence where her friends used to be.

Rictus looked down.

His eyes were burning with a tricolor fire—Gold, Black, and Red.

He looked at the wreckage of the fight.

He saw Torque, powered down and silent by the sled. He saw Jax, unconscious and broken. He saw Gubbins, weeping in the shadow of a rock.

And he saw Sadie.

She was curled around the broken pieces of the iron band. She looked small. Insignificant.

Rictus descended. He hovered inches above the ground, right in front of her.

"LOOK AT YOU," Rictus whispered. The voice was Kegan's now. Human. Cruel. **"THE TREASURER. THE HERO."**

Sadie didn't respond. She just stared at the broken iron.

"DO YOU KNOW WHY YOU LOST, SADIE?"

Rictus reached out and tapped her forehead with a golden finger.

"IT WASN'T BECAUSE YOU WERE WEAK. IT WAS BECAUSE YOU WERE ARROGANT."

He laughed softly.

"YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD PLAY THE GAME BETTER THAN THE MAN WHO WROTE THE RULES. YOU THOUGHT IF YOU JUST HIT IT HARD ENOUGH, OR TRADED SMART ENOUGH, YOU COULD BEAT THE HOUSE."

He stood up, towering over her.

"BUT YOU FORGOT THE FIRST RULE OF GAME DESIGN, SADIE."

He gestured to himself. To his perfection.

"THE ADMIN ALWAYS HAS GOD MODE."

Sadie closed her eyes.

"Kill me," she whispered.

Rictus paused. He tilted his head.

"KILL YOU?"

He laughed again. It was a terrible sound.

"WHY WOULD I KILL YOU? YOU ARE HARMLESS. YOU ARE OBSOLETE."

He kicked the broken halves of the iron band away. They skittered across the stone, falling into a crack in the ground.

"NO," Rictus said. **"I THINK I WILL LET YOU LIVE. I WANT YOU TO SEE IT."**

He pointed to the sky.

"I WANT YOU TO WATCH ME BUILD THE NEW WORLD. I WANT YOU TO SEE YOUR FRIENDS' FACES ON MY NPCS. I WANT YOU TO WALK THROUGH THE PARADISE YOU REJECTED AND KNOW THAT YOU PAID FOR IT."

He turned his back on her.

"LEAVE HER," Rictus commanded the canyon. **"SHE ISN'T A PLAYER ANYMORE. SHE'S JUST BACKGROUND TEXTURE."**

He flew up toward the rim of the canyon, leaving a trail of golden light.

Sadie lay in the dust.

She reached out for the band. But it was gone.

She reached out for Thorne. He was gone.

She touched her chest. Her heart was beating. *Thump. Thump.*

It felt like a punishment.

She was alive. And she had lost everything.

Chapter 23

The canyon was quiet, save for the god in the sky.

High above the violet dust, **Rictus** was busy redecorating. He hovered five hundred feet in the air, his new golden wings beating slowly, casting long, shifting shadows over the wreckage of the amphitheater. He waved a hand, and the glitching clouds rearranged themselves into neat, symmetrical rows. He pointed at a mountain, and it dissolved into a waterfall of binary code.

He was rewriting the world. And he was doing it with the power of Sadie's friends.

Down in the dirt, Sadie Miller stared at the broken pieces of the **Soulbound Treasury**.

The iron band had snapped cleanly in half. The edges were jagged, sharp enough to cut skin. They lay in the violet dust like dead things—cold, heavy, and useless.

"He won," Gubbins whispered. The gnome was huddled behind a rock, peeking up at the golden figure. "Sadie... look at him. He's an Avatar. He has Valerius's shield. He has Kaelen's speed."

Sadie didn't look up. She reached out and touched the two halves of the iron band.

She expected them to be inert. She expected them to feel like scrap metal.

Zzzzt.

A tiny spark jumped between the iron and her fingertip.

It wasn't magic. It wasn't the warm, comforting hum of the System. It was a static shock. A magnetic pull.

Sadie frowned. She pushed the two halves of the band closer together in the dirt.

They clicked.

They didn't fuse. They didn't heal. But they stuck together, held by a faint, invisible tension. They vibrated against the ground, turning slightly to point toward the sky. toward Rictus.

"They aren't dead," Sadie whispered.

"The gems are gone, Sadie," Gubbins said, his voice cracking. "The magic is in the stones. The iron is just... the setting."

"No," Sadie said. Her voice was rough, like gravel in a mixer. "Rictus said he wrote the code. He said the band was a 'Lifeboat.' A container."

She picked up the broken pieces. They bit into her palm, drawing a bead of blood.

"The container is broken," Sadie said. "But the *address*... the address is still here."

She looked at her wrist. The pale skin where the band had sat for years. The indentation.

Rictus thought the bond was in the hardware. He thought if he broke the modem, he cut the connection.

But the **Soulbound** class wasn't about hardware. It was about the user.

"Torque," Sadie said.

She crawled over to the sled.

The Warlord was awake. He looked terrible. His skin was grey, his remaining eye bloodshot. But his chest—the open wound where the Golem-Drive spun—was glowing with a steady, rhythmic blue light. The stabilizer fluid was working.

"I'm here, Treasurer," Torque rasped. "Engine is idling at 20%. I can't move the sled."

"I don't need the sled," Sadie said. She held up the broken iron. "I need an amplifier."

Torque looked at the scrap metal in her hand. He looked up at the god in the sky.

"You want to call them," Torque realized.

"They're inside him," Sadie said. "He thinks they're data. He thinks he can just format them and overwrite their personalities. But they aren't data, Torque. They're stubborn, angry, traumatized ghosts."

She clenched her fist around the sharp iron.

"I just need to remind them who they work for."

"He’s five hundred feet up," Torque grunted. "Your voice won't reach him."

"My voice won't," Sadie agreed. "But a Resonance spike? Amplified by a Golem-Core running on pure stabilizer fluid?"

She looked at the spinning turbine in Torque’s chest.

"That might ring the bell."

Torque smiled. It was a gruesome sight, teeth stained with oil.

"It will fry you, Sadie," the Warlord warned. "You're asking me to run kinetic voltage through your nervous system. You aren't wire. You're meat."

"I'm the Treasurer," Sadie said. "I handle the assets."

She looked at Gubbins.

"Wire me up."

It took two minutes.

Gubbins worked with frantic, terrified speed. He stripped the insulation off the main output cables of the Golem-Drive. He didn't have connectors, so he wrapped the bare copper wire around Sadie’s wrists.

"This is insane," Gubbins muttered, his hands shaking. "This is literally an electric chair. We are building an electric chair."

"Tighten it," Sadie ordered.

She held the two halves of the broken iron band in her left hand. She squeezed them until the jagged edges sliced into her palm, mingling her blood with the metal.

"Connect me," she said.

Gubbins looked at her. He saw the bruises. The splinted arm. The sheer, terrifying exhaustion in her eyes.

"Don't die," Gubbins whispered.

He twisted the wires together.

CRACK.

The connection was live.

Sadie arched her back. A scream tore from her throat, but it was strangled by the seizure that gripped her muscles.

It didn't feel like fire. It felt like being kicked by a horse, over and over again, from the inside out. Blue light arced up her arms, tracing her veins. Her hair stood on end. The smell of singing hair filled the air.

"Input!" Torque roared, revving his engine. "Sadie! Focus it! Don't let it cook you! Send it out!"

Sadie couldn't see. Her vision was white static.

She focused on the pain. She grabbed it. She forced it down her arm, into her hand, into the broken iron.

She didn't try to send a message. Words were too slow.

She sent a feeling.

She remembered the **Resonance Dive**. She remembered Thorne's fear in the red mist. She remembered Valerius's weight as a spear. She remembered Kaelen's shadow.

She remembered the promise she made. *Partners.*

"THORNE!" she screamed in her mind. **"VALERIUS! KAELEN!"**

"COME HOME!"

High in the sky, **Rictus** paused.

He was in the middle of deleting a mountain range. He had raised his hand to wipe the horizon clean, ready to replace it with a glistening wall of code.

Then, he twitched.

His hand shook. The golden armor on his arm rippled, turning momentarily back into grey, glitching flesh.

"ERROR," Rictus muttered, frowning. **"PACKET LOSS DETECTED."**

He tapped his chest.

Thump.

A second heartbeat. Stronger than his own.

"WHAT IS THIS?" Rictus demanded. **"DIAGNOSTIC!"**

He looked inward. He checked the files he had ingested.

File: Berserker. Status: *ERROR. FILE CORRUPTED.* **File: Paladin.** Status: *ERROR. FILE IN USE.* **File: Rogue.** Status: *MISSING.*

Rictus's eyes went wide.

"NO," he whispered. **"I FORMATTED YOU. I DELETED THE USER DATA."**

Suddenly, his left arm—the one holding the power of the Rogue—jerked violently. It wasn't him moving it.

His arm punched him in the face.

CRACK.

Rictus reeled back in the air, stunned.

"GET OUT OF MY KERNEL!" Rictus shrieked, clawing at his own throat.

His chest glowed. Not violet.

White.

A voice boomed from inside him. It wasn't his voice. It was a chorus of three.

"THE ADMIN..." Valerius’s voice rang out, noble and heavy.

"...DOES NOT..." Kaelen’s whisper cut like a knife.

"...OWN THE IRON!" Thorne’s roar shook the sky.

Rictus doubled over. He vomited a stream of red static.

"STOP IT!" Rictus screamed, falling out of the sky. He crashed into the side of the canyon wall, sending boulders tumbling. **"I AM THE ARCHITECT! I OWN YOU!"**

Down on the ground, Sadie Miller was burning.

Smoke rose from her coat. Her veins were glowing blue. She was screaming, a continuous, high-pitched wail of agony as she held the channel open.

"More!" she gasped. "Torque! Give me everything!"

"Sadie, you'll die!" Torque yelled, his own chest plate glowing cherry-red.

"BURN IT!" Sadie shrieked.

Torque slammed his fist into the dirt. He redlined the core.

ZZZZZ-RAK.

A massive surge of energy shot through Sadie.

She pointed the broken iron at the falling god.

"EJECT!"

Rictus hit the ground.

He tried to stand, but his body was rebelling. His golden armor was bubbling, boiling like soup. His shadow wings were tearing themselves apart.

"QUARANTINE!" Rictus begged. **"DELETE! SYSTEM RESTORE!"**

He clawed at his chest.

The Siphon Core—the violet sun inside him—turned black. Then Red. Then Amber.

The spirits weren't just fighting him. They were expanding.

They were trying to manifest *inside* a container that was too small.

Rictus bloated. His skin stretched, turning transparent. Beams of light shot out of his eyes, his mouth, his pores.

"TOO BIG!" Rictus wailed. **"THE FILES ARE TOO BIG!"**

He looked at Sadie. He saw the girl with the burning arms, holding the broken keys.

"YOU CHEATED," Rictus whispered.

BOOM.

Rictus exploded.

It wasn't a fiery explosion. It was a data breach.

His physical form shattered into billions of voxels—cubes of light and grey flesh that scattered across the canyon like confetti. The shockwave knocked the canyon walls flat.

And from the center of the blast, three stars shot out.

A Red Comet. A Golden Meteor. A Black Shadow.

They didn't fly away. They arced through the air, screaming like banshees, drawn by a magnetic force that defied physics.

Sadie saw them coming.

She fell to her knees. She dropped her hands. The wires tore loose from her wrists.

She held up the broken pieces of the iron band.

"Catch," she whispered.

THWACK. THWACK. THWACK.

The three gems slammed into the dust directly in front of her hands. They were hot. Smoking. Vibrating with kinetic energy.

Sadie collapsed forward. Her hands closed over them.

The world went dark.

"Sadie?"

The voice was distant. Floating.

"Sadie! Breathe! Come on, boss!"

Sadie sucked in a breath. It tasted of dust and copper.

She opened her eyes.

Gubbins was hovering over her, slapping her cheeks. Torque was slumped against the sled, smoke rising from his chest, but he was grinning.

Jax was awake. The big man was dragging himself toward her, his face pale but his eyes bright.

"Did we win?" Sadie croaked.

She tried to sit up. Her arms felt like they had been run over by a tank. Her skin was red and blistered where the wires had been.

But her left hand was clenched tight.

She opened her fingers.

Lying in her palm, amidst the blood and the soot, were three gems.

Amber. Obsidian. Ruby.

They weren't dull. They weren't grey.

They were pulsing. A slow, steady, synchronized rhythm.

Thump... Thump... Thump.

And resting on top of them were the two halves of the iron band.

Sadie touched the iron. It was warm.

She pushed the two halves together around the gems.

CLICK.

There was no welder. No magic spell.

The iron just... fused.

It knitted itself back together, the jagged crack sealing up as if it had never been broken. The rust fell away, revealing clean, dark metal.

The **Soulbound Treasury** was whole.

Sadie stared at it. She slipped it onto her wrist. It resized instantly, fitting perfectly against her skin.

"SYSTEM RESTORED," Thorne’s voice rumbled in her mind. It was quiet. Tired. But it was there.

"DURABILITY: 100%," Valerius added softly.

"WE ARE HOME," Kaelen whispered.

Sadie closed her eyes. She leaned her forehead against the dirt and laughed. It was a broken, sobbing laugh, but it was real.

"We passed," she whispered. "We passed the check."

She looked at the crater where Rictus had been. There was nothing left but a pile of grey dust and a few scraps of twisted metal. The Glitch-King was gone. Deleted.

The violet sky above began to clear. The static wind died down.

Sadie looked at her team.

"Let's go home," she said.

Chapter 24

The silence that followed the explosion was heavy enough to crush a man.

It wasn't the peaceful silence of a library or a sleeping house. It was the silence of a battlefield after the artillery stops—a ringing, deafening absence of noise that felt wrong in the ears.

Sadie Miller sat on her heels in the violet dust. Her hands rested on her thighs, palms up. They were shaking violently. The skin on her wrists and palms was angry—red, blistered, and smelling of singed hair. The copper wires Gubbins had wrapped around her were gone, disintegrated by the surge, but the ghost of their heat remained, tracing fire up her forearms.

She took a breath. It tasted of ash and copper.

"Status check," she rasped. Her voice sounded like it belonged to a stranger—someone older, broken.

"Alive," Jax groaned. The big man was lying a few feet away, staring up at the clearing sky. His chest heaved with difficulty, his broken ribs grinding with every inhale. "I think."

"Functional," Torque's voice was a low, mechanical rumble. The Warlord was slumped against the wreckage of the sled, his one eye dim. The green fire that had burned in his chest was gone, replaced by the faint, rhythmic pulse of the pilot light. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

"I'm okay!" Gubbins squeaked, popping up from behind a rock. He was covered in black oil and grey dust, looking like a mechanic who had exploded. "I'm okay! We didn't die! That was... statistically improbable!"

Sadie looked down at her left wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** sat there. It wasn't glowing. It wasn't screaming. It was just a band of dark, heavy iron, cool against her burned skin. The three gems—Amber, Obsidian, Ruby—were dull, resting in their settings like sleeping eyes.

It looked mundane. It looked like scrap.

But Sadie could feel the weight of it. Not the physical weight, but the gravity. The three minds inside were quiet, resting in the dark, but they were there.

"WE ARE HERE, SADIE," Thorne's voice whispered in her mind. It wasn't a roar. It was soft, like distant thunder.

Sadie closed her eyes. "You came back."

"THE CAGE IS STRONG," Valerius answered, his tone heavy with a sadness that broke her heart. **"BUT THE KEY... THE KEY IS WARM."**

They knew. Rictus had told them. They were software. Prisoners in a digital lifeboat. And she was the one wearing the handcuffs.

"I didn't know," Sadie whispered to the iron. "I swear."

"WE KNOW," Kaelen murmured. **"THE USER IS BLIND. ONLY THE ADMIN SEES THE CODE."**

Sadie swallowed the lump in her throat. She wiped her face with her shoulder, smearing soot across her cheek.

She forced herself to move. She was the Treasurer. And the audit wasn't finished until the loot was counted.

She crawled toward the crater.

It was a shallow depression in the rock, scorched black and smelling of ozone. This was where Rictus—Kegan, the Architect, the Glitch-King—had stood when he exploded.

He had been a god for five minutes. Now he was just dust.

"Sadie, don't," Jax called out weakly. "Let it lie."

"Boss drops loot," Sadie muttered, driven by a compulsion deeper than exhaustion. "High-level boss. Unique mob. Has to drop loot."

She reached the edge of the crater. The ground was hot. Violet sparks still danced in the air, fading like dying fireflies.

She sifted through the grey ash with her blistered fingers.

There was no gold. No legendary sword. No epic armor. Rictus's body had been made of garbage and glitch-code; it had all dissolved.

But in the center of the scorch mark, something caught the light.

Sadie reached out. Her fingers brushed something smooth. Cold. Dense.

She pulled it out of the ash.

It was a cube.

Matte black. Perfectly symmetrical. About three inches wide. It felt heavier than lead, as if it contained more mass than its size allowed. There were no seams. No buttons. No lights.

Just a single line of silver text etched into the side in a font so sharp it looked like it cut the material:

[Encryption: Kegan-Omega]

Sadie stared at it.

It wasn't a weapon. It wasn't treasure.

"Source Code," she whispered.

Rictus had said he wanted to rewrite the world. He said he had the patch notes. This was it. His backup drive. His legacy.

She knew she should throw it back into the pit. She should bury it. It was dangerous. It was the thing that had made him a monster.

But she was a Scavenger. And Scavengers didn't throw away things they didn't understand.

She slipped the cube into her pocket. It pulled at her coat, a heavy, secret weight against her hip.

"Nothing," she called back to the team. "Just ash."

RUMBLE.

The ground lurched.

Sadie fell forward, catching herself on her splinted arm. Pain shot up her shoulder, white and blinding.

"Tremor!" Gubbins yelled.

"No," Torque growled, struggling to sit up. "Not a tremor. A crash."

Sadie looked up.

The violet sky was tearing.

It wasn't a cloud parting. It was the texture of the sky ripping open. Great jagged black lines were appearing in the air, revealing a void of white static behind them.

The floating rocks—the ones Rictus had suspended with his will—shuddered.

CRASH.

A boulder the size of a house fell from the sky, slamming into the canyon wall a hundred yards away. It shattered, sending a spray of stone shrapnel across the amphitheater.

"The glitch is destabilizing!" Gubbins shrieked. "Without the host... without Rictus... the zone is deleting itself!"

"The canyon is collapsing," Sadie realized. She scrambled to her feet, swaying dizzily. "We have to go. Now!"

Getting back to the sled took a lifetime.

Every step was a negotiation with gravity. The ground rippled like water. One second Sadie felt heavy; the next she was nearly weightless, bounding forward in slow motion.

"Torque!" she yelled. "Start the engine!"

"I have 2% fuel!" Torque roared back. He was punching the dashboard of the sled with his remaining hand. "The core is cold! It won't ignite!"

"Hotwire it!" Sadie ordered, grabbing the side of the sled to steady herself. "Gubbins! The air is full of static! Use the ambient charge!"

Gubbins looked at the sparking air, then at the dying engine.

"Induction loop!" the gnome realized. "I can turn the hull into a lightning rod!"

He scrambled onto the hood of the sled. He ripped a panel off, exposing the copper coils of the intake. He jammed a piece of rebar into the coils, creating a makeshift antenna.

ZAP.

A bolt of violet lightning from the collapsing sky struck the rebar.

VRRR-THUM.

The sled bucked. The Golem-Drive screamed to life, not with the clean hum of stabilizer fluid, but with the dirty, crackling roar of raw chaos magic.

"It’s unstable!" Gubbins yelled, his hair standing on end. "It’s going to run hot!"

"Does it move?" Sadie screamed.

"Yes!"

"Then load up!"

Jax tried to stand, but his legs gave out. He fell face-first into the dirt.

"Jax!" Sadie lunged for him, grabbing his collar with her good hand. She pulled, but he was too heavy. "Torque! Help him!"

The Warlord leaned over the side of the sled. He grabbed Jax by the back of his armor and hauled him onto the deck like a sack of grain. Jax groaned, blood bubbling on his lips.

"Go!" Jax wheezed. "Drive!"

Sadie threw herself onto the sled next to Torque.

"Punch it!"

Torque slammed the throttle forward.

The sled didn't just accelerate. It shot forward like a cork from a bottle. The raw static energy bypassed the speed regulators. They were doing sixty miles an hour instantly.

Behind them, the amphitheater vanished.

A massive wall of white static—the **Deletion Line**—was sweeping across the canyon floor. Everything it touched simply ceased to exist. Rocks, machines, the crater... they didn't explode. They just vanished into the white void.

"Faster!" Sadie screamed, staring at the encroaching nothingness.

"I’m giving it all she’s got!" Torque bellowed, wrestling the tiller. The sled drifted wildly, banking off the canyon walls.

They rocketed through the Needle’s Eye. The floating boulders were falling now, raining down around them like meteors.

BOOM.

A rock smashed into the path right behind them. The shockwave lifted the tail of the sled, sending them into a skid.

Torque corrected, slamming the sled sideways through a gap in the falling debris.

"We’re not going to make the border!" Gubbins wailed, clutching the antenna. "The delete wave is faster than us!"

Sadie looked back. The white wall was eating the world. It was silent. Relentless.

She looked at the Treasury band.

"Thorne," she whispered. "We need a push."

"I AM EMPTY, SADIE," the spirit replied. **"I HAVE NO KINETIC CHARGE."**

"I don't need kinetic," Sadie said. "I need mass. I need you to be heavy."

She grabbed the rear handle of the sled.

"Kaelen! Lighten the load! Gravity dampen!"

"DONE."

The black stone on the band flared. The sled stopped rattling. It felt lighter, buoyant.

"Now... Thorne! Anchor the rear! Swing the tail!"

Sadie threw her weight to the left. At the same time, the red stone flared. Thorne concentrated his mass on the rear left corner of the sled.

The physics engine glitched.

The sled whipped around, drifting perfectly around a falling spire of rock. The added momentum slingshotted them forward, gaining speed.

"Yes!" Sadie screamed.

Ahead of them, the violet air shimmered.

A wall of distortion stretched across the canyon mouth. Beyond it, the sky wasn't purple. It was red. The sun was setting.

The Real World.

"The threshold!" Gubbins pointed. "We have to punch through!"

"Brace!" Torque roared.

He aimed the sled at the center of the distortion. He didn't slow down.

The white wall of deletion was inches from their bumper. Sadie could feel the cold nothingness sucking at her coat.

They hit the barrier.

CRACK.

It felt like hitting water from a high dive.

The world twisted. Colors inverted. Up became down.

Sadie's stomach turned inside out. She gagged, clutching the rail.

For a second, they were nowhere. A tunnel of spiraling light and code.

Then, gravity returned with a vengeance.

WHAM.

The sled burst out of the distortion field.

The air was hot. Dry. It smelled of dust and sagebrush.

They were airborne. They had shot out of the canyon mouth, launching off a dune.

The sled hit the red sand of the frontier desert. It bounced. Skidded. Spun three hundred and sixty degrees.

CRUNCH.

The Golem-Drive died. The sled dug into a sandbank and flipped onto its side, dumping them all into the dirt.

Sadie rolled. She tumbled through the sand, coming to a stop on her back.

She lay there, gasping.

Silence.

Real silence. Not the static hum of the glitch. Just the wind blowing through the dunes.

She opened her eyes.

The sky was a deep, bruising purple of twilight, fading into the indigo of night. The first stars were coming out. Normal stars. Fixed. Steady.

She sat up. She spat red dust.

"Sound off," she croaked.

"Ugh," Gubbins groaned from a bush nearby.

"Hrnng," Jax grunted from where he lay draped over the wreckage of the sled.

"Operational," Torque rasped.

Sadie looked back.

The canyon mouth was there. But the violet distortion was gone. The glitch had sealed itself. It just looked like a dark, shadowed ravine cutting into the mountains. The **Bleeding Canyon** had clotted.

"We made it," Sadie whispered.

She looked down at her wrist.

The **Soulbound Treasury** gleamed in the twilight. It looked battered. Scratched. But whole.

"THE AIR IS THIN HERE," Thorne's voice murmured in her mind. **"BUT IT IS... QUIET."**

"We aren't done," Sadie said softly to the ghosts. "Rictus told us what you are. He told us about the Ancients. About the Lifeboat."

"YES," Valerius answered. **"WE REMEMBER."**

"I'm going to find out the rest," Sadie promised. She touched the cold iron. "I'm going to find out who put you in there. And I'm going to find the key."

"YOU ARE THE KEY, SADIE," Kaelen whispered.

Sadie shook her head. "No. I'm just the driver. But we're going to find the garage."

She stood up. Her legs were jelly, but they held.

She walked over to Jax. She helped him sit up. She checked Torque's chest —the core was dark, but cool.

They were battered. Broken. Broke.

But they were alive. And they had a lead.

Sadie put her hand in her pocket. Her fingers brushed the cold, smooth surface of the Black Cube.

[Encryption: Kegan-Omega]

"Here we come," Sadie whispered to the wind. "Let do this."

She looked at the horizon, where the lights of a distant outpost flickered—a safe zone, a vendor, a bed.

"Let's walk," Sadie said. "I need a drink."

Chapter 25

The desert floor didn't vibrate here. The sand didn't glow violet, and the rocks didn't float.

It was just dirt. Red, dry, unforgiving dirt.

Sadie Miller had never loved dirt so much in her life.

She stumbled, her boots catching on a root, but she didn't fall. A heavy, metal hand caught her elbow.

"Steady, Treasurer," Torque rasped.

The Warlord was a walking wreck. His left arm was gone, the stump capped with a makeshift dressing of oil-soaked rags. His chest plate was cracked open, revealing the dark, cool turbine of the Golem-Drive. He walked with a heavy limp, his servos whining in protest with every step, but he was upright.

"I'm good," Sadie lied, her voice a dry croak. "Just... adjusting to the gravity."

She looked back at the rest of her party.

Jax was twenty paces behind them, using his rusted iron pipe as a crutch. The big man was pale, his breath coming in shallow hitches that rattled in his bruised chest. But he was moving. He refused to be carried.

Gubbins brought up the rear, dragging a piece of the polymer sled piled high with their meager salvage—a few canteens, Torque’s spare ammo belt, and the empty canister of stabilizer fluid. The gnome looked like a chimney sweep who had been rolled in a mud puddle, but his goggles were perched brightly on his forehead.

They were a parade of the broken.

"How far?" Jax wheezed, pausing to lean on his pipe.

Sadie squinted at the horizon. The sky was turning a bruised purple, the stars fading as the pre-dawn light began to bleed upward. In the distance, a flicker of yellow light marked the perimeter of **Rust-Bucket Outpost**.

"Mile," Sadie said. "Maybe less."

"A mile," Jax grunted. "I can do a mile."

"You can do ten," Sadie said softly. "You tanked a god, Jax. A mile is a victory lap."

She touched her left wrist. The **Soulbound Treasury** sat there, cool and heavy. It wasn't humming. It wasn't burning. It was silent, like an engine that had finally been turned off after a long haul.

But she could feel them.

Thorne was a low, steady pressure in the back of her mind, like a heavy door closing. Valerius was a sense of calm structure. Kaelen was a sharp, cold clarity.

They were resting.

"We need water," Gubbins said, his voice small. "And a mechanic. Torque is leaking hydraulic fluid again."

"We'll get it," Sadie promised. "We have credit at Rust-Bucket. Or at least... we used to."

She patted her pocket. She didn't have gold. She didn't have loot.

But she had a story. And in the wasteland, sometimes a story was worth more than water.

They didn't make it to the gates. They collapsed in the shadow of a sandstone overhang about five hundred yards from the outpost walls.

It wasn't a tactical decision. It was a biological one. Their bodies simply stopped working.

Jax slid down the rock face, groaning as his legs gave out. Torque sat heavily in the sand, initiating a cooling cycle that sounded like a dying fan.

Gubbins curled up next to the sled wreckage, instantly asleep.

Sadie sat with her back to the stone, staring at the outpost lights. She should sleep. Her body was screaming for it. Her broken arm throbbed with a dull, sickening rhythm.

But her mind was racing.

"Sadie," Jax whispered. He wasn't asleep. His eyes were open, watching her.

"Yeah, big guy?"

"What did he mean?" Jax asked. "Rictus. Before the fight. He said... he said they were people."

Sadie froze. She looked at Torque. The Warlord’s one eye was open, fixed on her. Even Gubbins had cracked an eye open.

They had heard it. Amidst the chaos, the explosions, and the screaming, they had heard the truth.

Sadie looked down at the iron band.

"He wasn't lying," Sadie said. Her voice was quiet, swallowed by the desert wind. "They aren't items, Jax. They never were."

She traced the Amber gem with her thumb.

"Valerius was a Paladin. Thorne was a Soldier. Kaelen was a Rogue. They were people. Like us."

She looked up at them, meeting their gaze.

"The Guild... the Architects... they didn't just build the System. They built a lifeboat. They wanted to upload themselves to survive the crash. But they needed to test the compression first."

She tapped the band.

"This isn't a treasury. It’s a hard drive. And they are the beta testers who got stuck in the upload."

Silence stretched between them.

Jax looked horrified. He looked at his own shield—a slab of rusted metal—and then at Sadie's wrist.

"They're... ghosts?" Jax whispered. "Trapped in the metal?"

"Worse," Torque rumbled. "They are consciousness without agency. They are aware, but they cannot act unless a User inputs a command."

The Warlord's mechanical hand twitched.

"I know that feeling," Torque said softly. "When the servos lock up. When the code overrides the muscle. It is... a cold hell."

"I used them," Sadie said, the guilt rising in her throat like bile. "For years. I treated Thorne like a stat stick. I treated Valerius like a wall. I summoned them, broke them, and put them back in the dark."

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'm not a Treasurer. I'm a Warden."

A hand touched her shoulder. It was heavy. Warm.

Jax.

"You didn't know," Jax said.

"Ignorance isn't a defense," Sadie muttered.

"No," Torque agreed. "But action is."

The Warlord leaned forward. The gears in his neck whirred.

"You freed them, Sadie. You broke the Admin command. You let them fight. You let them choose."

Sadie looked at the band. The memory of the fight—the white light, the feeling of Thorne's rage mixing with her own—washed over her.

"They chose to fight," Sadie whispered. "They chose to stay."

"WE CHOSE THE PARTNER."

The voice wasn't spoken. It resonated in the minds of everyone in the circle.

Jax jumped. Gubbins yelped.

The Ruby gem on the band pulsed once. A deep, warm red light.

"WE ARE NOT PRISONERS ANYMORE, SADIE," Thorne's voice rumbled in the silence. **"WE ARE... THE PARTY."**

Sadie smiled. It was a watery, broken smile, but it was real.

"Yeah," she whispered. "We're the party."

"So," Gubbins said, sitting up and adjusting his goggles. "If Rictus was an Architect... and he built the band... what is *this*?"

He pointed to Sadie's pocket.

Sadie reached in and pulled out the **Black Cube**.

It sat in her palm, absorbing the starlight. It was matte black, seamless, and heavy.

"Loot," Sadie said. "He dropped it when he de-rezzed."

Gubbins scurried over. He pulled a magnifying lens from his belt and held it up to the cube.

"No seams," Gubbins muttered. "No ports. No power signature. It's... it feels like gravity plating. Pre-War tech."

He tapped the side where the silver text was etched.

[Encryption: Kegan-Omega]

"Kegan," Gubbins read. "That was his name. The Architect."

"He said he wanted to rewrite the world," Sadie said. "He said he needed the Source Code. Maybe this is it."

"Or maybe it's a map," Jax suggested. "To where the rest of them are."

"The rest of who?" Sadie asked.

"The Architects," Jax said. He looked at the outpost lights. "If Kegan survived... if he became a monster in a glitch... who says he was the only one?"

Sadie stared at the cube. The cold metal seemed to hum against her skin.

Rictus hadn't been a random boss. He was a symptom. A symptom of a sickness that lay at the very foundation of their world. The System hadn't just broken; it had been sabotaged.

"If there are more of them," Sadie said, her voice hardening. "Then we have work to do."

She tried to put the cube back in her pocket, but it stuck to her hand for a second, magnetized.

A faint blue light pulsed from the encryption line.

[Access Denied. Biometric Mismatch.]

[Requires: Admin Key.]

Sadie frowned. She looked at the Treasury band.

"Admin Key," she whispered.

She touched the band to the cube.

Nothing happened.

"Wrong key," Sadie mused. "Or maybe... wrong door."

She pocketed the cube.

"Gubbins," she said. "Can you crack it?"

Gubbins looked at the cube with a mix of fear and professional lust.

"Crack an Architect's personal drive? Using a screwdriver and a rusted datapad?"

He grinned.

"Give me a week and a pot of coffee. I'll get you a login screen."

Sadie leaned back against the rock. She felt lighter.

She lifted her left arm. She held the band up to the sky, checking it for damage.

The cracks from the **Resonance Dive** were gone. The fracture from the snap was gone. The metal was smooth, dark, and flawless.

She focused on it, triggering her **[Appraisal]** skill. It was a reflex.

A window popped up in her mind. It wasn't the blue Guild window. It was grey, static-edged.

[Item: The Soulbound Treasury] [Rank: Legendary (Broken/Reforged)] [Durability: ∞ / ∞] [Status: Jailbroken] [Active Spirits: 3] [Owner: Sadie Miller]

Sadie blinked.

Durability: Infinity.

It wasn't a number. It was a concept.

"Did it level up?" Jax asked, watching her face.

"No," Sadie said softly. "It stopped playing the game."

She lowered her hand.

"It says 'Jailbroken'," she told them. "It means the rules don't apply anymore. We don't have cooldowns. We don't have mana costs. We just have... capacity. As much as we can handle."

"That sounds dangerous," Torque grunted.

"It is," Sadie agreed. "But it means we can fight back."

She looked at her team. They were beaten. They were poor. They were technically Level 0 trash in a world of high-level monsters.

But they had a Jailbroken artifact. And they had a Warlord who could hotwire reality.

"We aren't scavengers anymore," Sadie said. "Scavengers pick up what's left behind."

She looked at the Black Cube in her pocket.

"We're bug hunters."

The sun crested the horizon.

It hit the top of the sandstone cliffs first, painting them in brilliant orange and gold. Then the light spilled down into the valley, chasing away the purple shadows of the night.

Sadie closed her eyes and let the warmth hit her face.

It felt real. It felt earned.

"Sunrise," Jax breathed. "A real one."

"No static," Gubbins noted, pulling his goggles down to shield his eyes. "No pixelation in the clouds. Render distance is infinite."

Torque made a whirring sound as his optics adjusted.

"Optical sensors recalibrated," the Warlord announced. "Efficiency at 15%. I need oil."

Sadie laughed. It hurt her ribs, but she laughed anyway.

"Let's get you some oil, big guy."

She stood up. Her knees popped. Her back ached. Every inch of her body was a map of the last twenty-four hours.

But she stood.

Jax used his pipe to haul himself up. Gubbins hopped to his feet, grabbing the strap of the salvage sled. Torque pushed himself upright, his one arm hanging loose, but his head held high.

They stood together in the morning light. Four broken things that fit together to make something whole.

Sadie looked at them.

"We look like hell," she said.

"We look like winners," Jax corrected.

"We look like a liability," Torque grunted. "Let's move before the perimeter patrols charge us a loitering fee."

They began the walk to the outpost gates.

The guards on the wall watched them come. They saw a woman with a broken arm, a cyborg leaking fluid, a limping giant, and a gnome dragging a pile of trash.

They didn't open the gates out of respect. They opened them out of pity.

As they passed under the rusted metal archway of **Rust-Bucket**, Sadie stopped.

She looked back.

Beyond the desert, beyond the horizon, the dark line of the mountains marked where the Bleeding Canyon had been. It was just a scar on the land now.

But she knew what was buried there. She knew what Rictus had tried to build.

And she had the key to the next lock in her pocket.

"Where do we go after we resupply?" Jax asked, limping beside her. "Back to the city? Try to find another gig?"

Sadie shook her head.

"No more gigs," she said.

She touched the Treasury band. She felt Thorne’s presence—a warm, steady hum of readiness.

"The Architects left a mess," Sadie said. "They left their trash, their glitches, and their prisoners all over this world."

She turned forward, facing the dusty street of the outpost.

"We're going to find the garage," Sadie said. "We're going to find the ones who wrote the code."

"And then?" Torque asked.

Sadie smiled. It was the Treasurer’s smile. Cold. Calculating. And dangerous.

"And then," she said. "We're going to audit them."

About Author

Honora Vale is a LitRPG and fantasy author who specializes in progression-driven stories, complex systems, and morally gray characters. Her work combines game mechanics with high-stakes fantasy, exploring what it truly costs to grow stronger with a slice of life.